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A LIFE'S MISTAKE.

A NOVEL.

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BY
MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

DECEIVERS EVER," "JULIET'S GUARDIAN," "VERA NEVILL,"
"PURE GOLD," "A NORTH-COUNTRY MAID,"
"IN A GRASS COUNTRY," ETC., ETC.

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"Yet, oh yet, thyself deceive not:
Love may sink by slow decay,
But by sudden wrench believe not
Hearts can thus be torn away."—BYRON.

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OF NEW YORK.
A LIFE'S MISTAKE.

CHAPTER I.

HOW WE AWAITED THE ENEMY.

"My poverty but not my will consents."
Romeo and Juliet.

IPHIGENIA, a daughter of Agamemnon. When the Greeks, going to the Trojan War, were detained by contrary winds, they were informed by a soothsayer, that to appease the gods they must sacrifice Iphigenia to Diana."

A classical dictionary lies open before me, and the above is an extract therefrom.

I am about to write my own history, and, with slight modifications, the history of Iphigenia resembles mine.

I was sacrificed to appease the gods.

"Fred!"

"My poppet!"

"Is any one coming up the avenue yet?"

"Two horsemen may be seen pricking across the plain," quotes Fred from one of Mr James' novels which lies open before him.

Fred is on the top of the kitchen-garden wall, from which vantage-ground he can observe the surrounding country. I am on the lowest rung of the ladder by which he has ascended, and am engaged in the homely and entirely prosaic occupation of shelling peas.

Before me lies, within its high, red walls, the wilderness of our kitchen garden—an old garden rich in vegetables and fruit trees, and sweet, old-fashioned flowers along the borders, but ragged with weeds and long unpruned branches amongst which a gardener's hand is rarely seen. Beyond the garden are the tall chimneys of Follerton Court, and through an open doorway is a glimpse of its high-pitched gables, and deep-set diamond-paned windows twinkling in the afternoon sunshine.

My brother, resting his chin in his two hands, is absorbed in his novel. I go on shelling peas into the wooden bowl on my knees, with many thoughts, grave and gay, passing through my head.

Silence for about five minutes more, during

which the rattle of the peas as they drop into the bowl, and the regular rustle of the leaves of Fred's book as he turns them over, are the only sounds that break the stillness of the afternoon. Then I speak again.

"Fred, do look out once more, and shut up that horrid book, and talk to me."

Fred, thus adjured, closes his book with a snap, and revolves slowly round upon the wall, legs and all, until he faces the park which lies beyond.

"There's not a living thing to be seen, except a crow and three sheep browsing. My dear child, they can't possibly be here for another quarter of an hour."

I sigh audibly.

Fred twists himself round again with his feet on the ladder, and begins pelting the crown of my battered garden hat with small missiles which are ready to hand—the crumbles of mortar upon the summit of the wall.

"Don't, Fred, they are going into the peas."

"Happy thought; perhaps they will choke him," suggests Fred cheerily. "Are you coming out to welcome him with your sleeves turned up, and that domestic-looking basin in your hands?"

* Good heavens! no. As soon as you see the

dogcart turning in at the lodge I shall take the peas to Mrs Butt, and go in and wash my hands. There will be plenty of time, if you give me warning directly you see them."

"All right."

Presently I throw down my peas, bowl and all, at my feet, and, casting back my head against the ladder behind me, look up at my brother.

How handsome he looks sitting there above me in his rough tweed suit, with his ruffled hair just tinted into gold by the setting sun! We are as like as two peas, Fred and I, only that Fred, it seems to me, is as handsome as an Apollo, whilst I—I suppose I am not handsome at all; at least Fred always tells me I am not. My hair is a shade darker and less glossy than his, my eyes are less blue, and somehow the regular features that in him are so full of grace and beauty, in me, as I look wistfully into my glass, have just missed the smooth outlines of his, and present nothing but a rough irregularity to my anxious gaze.

But I am not envious of Fred. How should I be, seeing how much I love him? Is he not the very joy of my heart,—the very apple of my eye? Am I not sister, brother, mother to him, all in one? I idolise him, and I can

see no flaw in my idol—not yet. I have only one grief about him. We have never been parted yet. Fred has been educated at a grammar school in the town two miles off, where he was a day-boarder; but now he is eighteen, and has left school, and is to go to Oxford as soon as the summer vacation is over, and then, what am I to do?

Meanwhile Fred aims a bit of mortar straight at my upturned nose and hits it. This playfully re-awakens me to the present.

“Oh! Fred, what do you think will happen?”

“As how?” queries Fred.

“I mean the enemy.”

“Do you think there will be a railway accident on the way, and smash him?”

“Not a chance,” I answer promptly. “Nought never comes to grief.”

“It’s a pity!” continues Fred reflectively, as though loth to abandon the idea. “It would be a neat way of disposing of him.”

“What a relief it would be!” I answer calmly; and no thought of the hundred or so innocent fellow-passengers who might perish with the man we had named the “enemy” entered into our murderous young souls as we tranquilly discussed the possibilities of this awful catastrophe.

“It would hardly do so well if the mare were

to bolt and kick the dogcart to pieces, because it would very likely kill papa, too, or at least break his leg," I say, after a moment's pause, given up to meditation on the divers kinds of death which might occur, by rail or road, to the unfortunate object of our conversation.

"Just so. That is *not* a happy thought, Maggie," answered Fred.

Another pause, during which a whole flock of grey and white pigeons whirl smoothly across the face of the blue sky above my head, whilst Fred takes shots at a tall yellow hollyhock hard by, instead of at me, an improvement which I distinctly appreciate.

"Fred, do you know what 'to foreclose' means?" I asked suddenly.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because papa told me that was what this man Hardcastle would very likely do."

"*Beast!*" ejaculates Fred savagely.

"What does it mean?"

"Don't ask, Maggie. It means something awful. Pray Heaven that it may never happen. What a mercy it is that there is our mother's money to pay for my going to Oxford. Nothing can stop *that*," he added.

And I was so used to hear Fred talk of his delight at the prospect of going to college, that

it did not strike me that the remark was a slightly selfish one.

At nineteen, one's conversation is apt to be desultory, and one's reflections discursive.

Three minutes later I had forgotten to inquire further into the meaning of the verb "to fore-close," and my mind was being harassed by another trouble of a totally different character.

"And to think that I should have had to kill the very last couple of chickens for him!" I exclaimed.

"Are there no more coming on?"

"Not a chick; and I was saving them for your birthday, Fred."

"I wish Mrs Butt would put arsenic into the bread-sauce. I am sure she would, if you suggested it."

"It would turn it green."

"Strychnine, then; that's white."

"Papa is sure to give him the wings and the breast, and you will get nothing but the drum-sticks, my poor Fred," I say dolefully.

"I wish I was a girl! You women always get helped first. However, cheer up, Maggie. It's just possible he may swallow the merry-thought and it will throttle him."

"Let us hope so," I answered, seriously and devoutly.

Meanwhile Steven Hardcastle, Esq., unconscious of all the sundry kinds of death to which he was being successively doomed by the son and daughter of his host, was being rapidly driven by that host nearer and nearer to Follerton Court, where these hostile young spirits were awaiting him.

Two years ago, none of us had ever heard of the existence of Mr Hardcastle. We knew, indeed, vaguely, that the whole of the Follerton property was mortgaged up to the very doors of the house itself; but this fact had existed ever since Fred and I could remember: we had never known it otherwise; we did not, indeed, rightly understand what it meant, beyond the fact that we were not so rich as we used to be, and that the sheep and the cows in the park did not belong to us, nor the trees, nor even the hay in the summer time.

It was a pity, of course, not to be rich; but to us children it did not signify very much. We scrambled about all over the country, and we made friends with the sheep and the cows, and clambered up the trees after birds' nests, or fished with a bit of string and a crooked pin for minnows in the stream, and were just as happy as if they were all our very own.

By-and-by, as we grew older, we began to

understand that one reason why we were so poor was that papa had to pay a large interest for all these things. And at last there came a day when he could pay the interest no longer; and then it was that we began to hear of Mr Hardcastle.

Mr Hardcastle was the man who held the mortgages on the property. We were told that he was a City man, and a wealthy man; and papa's solicitors assured him, and papa in turn assured us, that he was the very soul of probity and honour. But for all that, to Fred and me, he was nothing but the vampyre who sucked our life's blood.

It was in vain that we were instructed to regard him with feelings of gratitude and respect, as having behaved with the utmost forbearance and courtesy in that little matter of the interest which papa was unable to pay. What was such a trifle as interest! Was he not the wretch, the monster, the tyrant, who had somehow—by unholy and unlawful means, as it seemed to us—gained an actual right over Follerton—*our* Follerton, that had been in the Orchester family ever since the days of the Tudors, and which was now doomed to pass some day into the hands of this man, whose beggarly ancestors probably swept the crossings in his detested

city, at a time when ours waited about the throne of kings! And we hated him with a deadly hatred—blind and unreasoning—such as the young alone can feel.

Two years of non-payments of interest will wear out the most Christian forbearance. Mr Hardcastle got tired of excuses and promises, conveyed through every phase of a lengthened correspondence. One fine day he wrote, with all courtesy and politeness, to my father, and said, that, if it would not be altogether inconvenient to him, he would come down himself to Follerton for a couple of days, and see what arrangements they could come to in a personal interview for a settlement of matters.

Of course it was altogether inconvenient to receive him. I made that as plain as I could to my father when he showed me the letter.

We had not a decently-furnished spare room in the old house—that is to say, not a room that did not require papering and painting, and refitting with every modern luxury. We had only two indoor servants, and one old groom and his son to do the stable and garden work; and we had only one couple of chickens left fit to eat. How could we be expected to take in a guest who was accustomed to luxuries of every kind?

"Quite impossible!" I cried decidedly, giving the letter back to my father.

"Nevertheless, my dear, I fear it must be done; you must make the best of it. God knows, I would spare myself the ordeal if I could; as it is, it is my only chance."

And my father's careworn face became a shade greyer, and older, and sadder as he spoke.

So we contrived to make one of the gaunt empty rooms habitable, by gathering together in it all the best of the dilapidated furniture in the old house; and we got in a girl from the village to help; and we killed the last couple of chickens in honour of the evening.

And now he was here—at our very doors.

"Here comes the dogcart!" cries Fred, from his point of observation at the top of the wall.

And away I fly into the house, with my basin full of peas in my arms.

"Do you see him?" I cry back to Fred as I depart.

"Yes!" shouts Fred; "and he is like Mephistopheles."

CHAPTER II.

HOW WE WELCOMED HIM.

"We love too much, hate in the like extreme."

Pope.

WHETHER or no he resembled Mephistopheles as Fred averred, he was at all events a very striking-looking man.

As I stood upon the door-step, with my hair freshly smoothed, and all traces of the peashelling removed from my hands and my linen dress, I felt, as I stood there to meet my father and his guest, that Mr Stephen Hardcastle was a man who could by no means be overlooked in any circumstances whatever.

The first impression that he produced upon my youthful observation was that he was very old indeed. He was, in fact, probably somewhere between forty-five and fifty; and to the ideas of nineteen that is a very considerable age.

"He is nearly as old as my father," I said to myself.

He was tall and slight, and walked with a stoop, and he was rather bald, with greyish hair; but his closely-trimmed pointed beard was coal-black, with hardly a streak in it,

and he had the keenest and most piercing black eyes I ever saw in any human being. I suppose he might be considered a handsome man, only, as I said to myself, he was quite old. I think I was rather annoyed not to find him a monster of scowling ugliness, instead of, as he indubitably was, a good-looking, gentleman-like, middle-aged man.

"This is my daughter," said my father to him, as they entered the house.

Mr Hardcastle glanced at me shortly and coldly, as it seemed to me, and bowed. I was relieved that he did not offer to shake hands with me. I felt I could hardly have given him mine.

"Would you like to see your room, Mr Hardcastle?" said my father hesitatingly. "Shall my daughter take you upstairs?"

I fancied that my father looked unusually nervous and ill at ease. His hand shook, and his voice trembled a little.

"Thank you, no. With your leave, I will go out for a turn by myself. I suppose you don't dine till seven o'clock, Mr Orchester?"

"Any time that suits you: seven or half-past, just as you like," my father hastened to reply.

"Thanks; seven-thirty will suit still better," he answered quietly.

And, pushing his hands into his pockets, our unwelcome guest goes out again, and walks rapidly away across the park among the clumps of elms and chestnuts, and the great Scotch firs, with their bronze-red trunks, that are the glory of Follerton, amongst whose venerable shadows he is shortly lost to view.

My father turns into his study, and, dropping into a chair by the table, covers his face with his hands, and groans.

"Papa—papa!" I cry, taking the dear old white head into my arms, "what has happened?—what has that wretch been saying to you? Horrid, hateful *brute!*" I add, clenching my fists in fury.

And if wicked, unchristian, murderous thoughts could slay a man, surely Stephen Hardcastle would have perished that night.

"Hush! Maggie, my dear child; pray control yourself. I must entreat you to be civil to the man. Our very existence depends upon him."

"Tell me, papa, what can he do to us?" I asked, sobered out of my childish anger.

"Nothing but what I have known all along."

"Is it what you told me?" I asked. "You said he would foreclose—what does it mean, papa?"

"It means—oh! my dear Maggie—it is the worst that can happen—he will turn us out!"

"Turn us out!" I cried, horror-struck; "turn us out of our own house,—out of Follerton, where we have lived for so long? Papa, how can that be? —he must be a monster!"

"My dear, you don't understand; he has a right, a perfect right. It must be his when I die. If I could pay him the interest, I could stop on in peace; but I don't know how to do it. And the man wants his money: it is only natural."

"And yet you said he was rich!" I interrupted.

"Ah! it is those who have money who make the most haste to get more," said my father sadly. "It is no use being angry with him, Madge: he is but a stranger. What are our troubles to him? he must make the most of his bargain, and he has shown me courtesy and forbearance hitherto. I am bound to acknowledge it. But on our way from the station he has said something — something to let me know that things cannot go on."

"Oh! papa, what can we do? Is there nothing we could sell?—no way in which we could get a little money just to keep him quiet?"

"No; there is nothing," he answered wearily. "You know that all we have been living on has been the interest of your mother's money, which is yours and Fred's. It is little enough, only three hundred pounds a year. If I could pay him but one hundred pounds a year out of that—"

"Oh! papa; and Fred—"

"Yes; then Fred must give up Oxford."

"Any thing better than that!" I cried. "It would break his heart."

My father sighed.

"There, my dear, leave me now," he said, with a little impatience, as he gently put me from him. "I must think it over. Go and see after the dinner, Maggie, dear, and be sure it is as nice as possible."

I went slowly away, feeling more favourably inclined towards the surreptitious use of strychnine and prussic acid than ever.

The dinner, from a culinary point of view, was a success. Mrs Butt, who was always a genius, by which I mean that out of next to nothing she was able to produce astonishing results, had, on this occasion, surpassed herself; but from a social aspect, the repast was a failure.

My father was depressed and silent, Fred was sulky and silent. I was savage and silent. Our guest alone talked for everybody; but though he spoke lightly and pleasantly upon politics and literature, upon science and art, he evidently found it uphill work. Now and then my father roused himself with an effort; but he had no heart or spirit in him; and when the conversation languished, I too made an effort, and endeavoured to keep it up, without, I fear, very much success.

Thanks to the manners and customs of my native land, relief, in the shape of flight, came to me sooner than to the others. I left the dinner-table at the earliest opportunity, and, flinging a shawl hastily round me, sauntered out into the garden.

"I sha'n't be wanted any more to-night, that is one comfort," I said to myself, and I wished Fred would make haste and join me. Meanwhile, I strode down the broad gravel path, between the tall rows of hollyhocks and columbines and sweet cabbage-roses, that looked all white and pale and colourless in the twilight.

It was the most "witching hour" in the whole year—nine o'clock on a midsummer evening. The sky was just darkening into night; the stars were peeping out one by one. All the world was faint and indistinct around me. It was the hour for lovers' whispers. I had no lover to whisper to me—that was very certain; but I was nineteen, and I had my dreams. They were vague and intangible enough. I hardly understood them myself; but when I was in a sentimental mood there was a certain pair of brown eyes that haunted me.

As to being in love, I should have repudiated the very idea with indignant scorn. In love, indeed! I, who loved my father and Fred, and no one else in the world! But for all that there was a little vague speculation in the background

of my mind concerning the owner of those brown eyes.

It was three months since I had seen him. He had been staying with the Marsdens at Felton Hall, and, of course—oh! yes, of course—he was in love with Helen Marsden. She was so pretty, it would be small wonder if he were. Perhaps he would marry her some day, and how nice that would be! I was fond of Helen, and it would be nice to like her husband too. Oh yes, that would be very nice.

And I walked along between the flower borders, catching idly at the drooping columbine heads that hung out across the path, and I wondered to myself, with a vague yearning that I thought must have something to do with my friendship for Helen Marsden, when Frank Warner would come back again.

A step on the walk behind me, I turned short round, and away went sentiment to the winds. It is getting quite dark now, but a man is coming towards me. Fred, of course. Who else should it be?

“Oh, Fred, is there a chance of that hateful man's going to-morrow?” I cry aloud to him as he approaches.

A soft laugh answers me.

“I am afraid not, Miss Orchester,” says the voice of our guest close beside me.

Open, O earth! and swallow me up! Fall down ye apple and pear trees and crush me! Overflow thy banks, O duck-pond, and submerge me! Did ever anything so awful happen to an unfortunate girl before? And this was the man I had been specially enjoined and entreated to be civil to! I was literally paralysed with consternation.

"Oh!" I gasped, "pray forgive me. I never imagined for a moment—Mr Hardcastle, what can I say for myself?" And then, with a sudden relapse into a very excusable irritation, I exclaimed,—“But how on earth could I imagine that *you* would come out here after me?”

"How on earth, indeed!" echoed Mr Hardcastle. "Pray, don't apologise, Miss Orchester; it is no news to me that you consider me hateful. Do you object to smoking? May I light a cigar?"

He proceeded to light one rather slowly, and with great deliberation, as it seemed to me. I think he wanted to give me time to recover my self-possession.

"I may go a little way with you, I suppose?" he said, when he had started his cigar to his satisfaction; and without waiting for my consent, he turned round and walked by my side.

We stalked along side by side in absolute

silence; to save my life, I could not have spoken first.

"So you would like me to go away to-morrow?" he said presently, breaking a silence that was becoming every moment more and more embarrassing.

Having already told him so, there was no use in denying it. I answered,—

"Yes," with a certain grim pleasure in saying it to him, which I think must have amused him.

"I am so sorry I can't," he answered seriously; "if it were possible to oblige you, I would. And you say you hate me."

"I did not say I hated you. I said you were hateful."

"What a thoroughly feminine distinction!" and he laughed.

The laugh angered me beyond description.

"I have always hated you ever since I first heard your name," I burst forth savagely. "I don't think you can wonder at that."

"Perhaps not. You looked as if you could kill me when I first came into the house. Are you quite sure, Miss Orchester, that you had not poisoned that very nice little custard pudding to which you helped me so politely at dinner?"

Remembering the nefarious projects which

Fred and I had nourished concerning the introduction of strychnine into the banquet, I could not help laughing at this home-thrust.

"No," I said, half turning to him as I spoke,—"no, it wasn't poisoned, but I wish it had been."

And then Mr Harcastle turned to me also, and even in the dim evening light I could see that there was a pleasant smile upon his face, and when he smiled, I almost liked him.

"Tell me," he said, with a sudden change of manner, "tell me what you do, what your life is—you and your brother?"

"Oh! we have always lived here, you know—Fred and I are quite happy together, but soon we shall have to part."

"How is that?"

"Fred is going to Oxford."

"Indeed! And that will be a trouble to you?"

"Yes, and no," I answered; and it did not occur to me to wonder that I should be suddenly talking of myself and my concerns to this man whom I had so lately looked upon as a mortal foe. "Of course I shall miss him, but it will be such a great thing for Fred, and he longs to go so much. Oh no! papa and I would sooner live upon a crust than that he should be disappointed."

"But if your father cannot afford to send him?" suggested Mr Hardcastle.

And then I pulled myself up with a sudden revulsion of feeling. What was this man cross-questioning me for? Had he come out here to get things out of me?—to take advantage of my youth and my inexperience to find out that which my father would not have told him?

"I beg your pardon," I said coldly; "these things cannot interest you; they only concern ourselves."

"Indeed, they interest me very much," he said quietly. "However, if you do not care to talk of them, let us change the subject."

"I think tea must be ready," I said; and then we went in.

CHAPTER III.

HOW MISS MARSDEN HAD A LETTER, AND HOW THE ENEMY WENT AWAY.

"The dismal rain
Came down in slanting lines."—*A. Smith.*

It was a week later. Fred and I were *tête-à-tête* in a large empty upper chamber, which still went by the name of the "playroom." A rickety old

sofa, a couple of chairs at one end of the room, boxes full of the broken toys of our childhood piled up at the other, and a dilapidated rocking-horse in the centre, made up the furniture of this cheerful apartment, where on wet days Fred retired to smoke, and I followed him to converse.

It was a wet day to-day—a soft, steady, noiseless summer rain poured ceaselessly down upon the parched earth without, and a warm, steamy vapour came up again out of its grateful bosom. We could hear the rain gurgling in the leaden pipes under the eaves of our gabled house, and dripping in great heavy drops off the red tiles of the roof outside the windows of our playroom.

“It’s a fine thing for the crops,” had said Farmer Thompson, when he drove up in his tax-cart that morning.

But Fred and I did not care about the crops. Who does, before they are twenty? All we thought of was that it kept us indoors the whole of one long summer day, and that we had no other refuge than the old attic-room to spend it in.

Fred lay full length on his back on the sofa, with a pipe in his mouth. Hard by sat, or rather squatted, my fair self, knees and nose together, on the ancient rocking-horse, which swayed gently backwards and forwards under my weight, with a musical creaking.

"I wish you would get off that thing and sit quiet," says Fred irritably, without even taking his pipe out of his mouth to address me. "I declare you make me quite sea-sick."

"I am so comfortable, Fred; and there's nothing else to sit on."

"Keep the beast still, then."

I obey by sliding half off Toby's back, and by putting one foot down on his green stand to steady myself, and then, stooping down over his back, I proceed to extract from its socket the stump of his well-worn tail, out of which we had long ago plucked every vestige of horse-hair, and entertained myself with vain endeavours to replace it wrong end foremost.

No sound save the puffing of Fred's pipe, the steady drip of the rain outside, and below us the faint hum of voices proceeding from papa's study, where he and our guest are closeted together.

- For he is still at Follerton.

"How much longer is he going to stay?" asks Fred sulkily, indicating the lower regions of the house with a downward poke of his thumb.

"He must go soon, for he will be starved out. There's literally nothing left in the larder or the store cupboard, and we've eaten up all the ducks; and I have spent the whole of next week's house money which papa advanced to me."

"I wonder he likes to stop sponging on people who don't want him," retorted Fred. "The sooner he goes the better I shall be pleased."

I was silent. If there was one thing above all others that admitted of no sort of doubt, it was the dislike which Fred and Mr Hardcastle mutually entertained for each other.

"What on earth are they perpetually jawing about?" continued my brother. "Have you the least idea, Maggie?"

"No more than you have. Papa will tell me nothing, except that Mr Hardcastle is working out some plan or other for our benefit, he says."

"Benefit, indeed!" repeated Fred scornfully. "You may depend upon it he has about as much thought for our benefit as a boa-constrictor has for the rabbits he is about to swallow."

"I don't think he is altogether such a bad man, Fred," I say meditatively, being apparently wholly absorbed in scratching my own initials with a hairpin upon Toby's dappled back.

"Oh! as to *you*—you are quite converted to him! I suppose he flatters you up, and tells you you are lovely; that's all that is wanted with you girls. If you are told you are pretty, you are ready to swear that black is white, and that two and two don't make four."

"What rubbish, Fred!" I answered, with a

little flush. "Why should an old man like that tell me I am pretty? Besides, it wouldn't be a bit true, because I am not."

Fred turns round and contemplates me silently for a minute in silence.

"No," he says, at length, with that charming candour which is the distinctive feature of fraternal intercourse, "no, I can't honestly say you *are* in the least pretty; though I don't think you would be quite so bad looking if your nose didn't turn the wrong way."

"Oh, Fred," I say, with a rueful sigh—for it is always sad to a woman to realise that she is not fair, and I believed in my brother's candid criticism from the very bottom of my heart—"I know you have all the looks, dear."

"Well, yes; but never mind, Madge, you have all the goodness," answers Fred consolingly.

An assertion which, I suppose, ought to have more than comforted me. Only somehow it hardly did so.

"Maggie!" calls a clear, young voice outside; "Maggie, where are you?" and at the same time a cluster of fat little green baby rosebuds came flying through the open casement and fell at our feet.

"It is Helen!" cried Fred; and we both hurried to the window.

Below, on the gravel walk stood a small figure,

in a long waterproof cloak and a felt hat, almost hidden under a dripping umbrella.

"Come up—come up!" we cried, and Helen Marsden came upstairs into our attic.

"You have walked, Helen? All the way in this rain?"

"Oh yes, I walked. I had something to say, and I couldn't send a message, and there did not seem a chance of my getting a carriage out so I came off without saying a word to anybody. Mamma would only have made a fuss. I am not a bit wet, thank you, Fred,—only my boots."

She was divesting herself of her wraps as she talked,—a pretty, bright little creature, with yellow hair and forget-me-not blue eyes, and the complexion of a blush rose. Fred was taking her wet cloak from her.

"Your boots are as wet as possible!" he exclaimed. "Take them off, and I will give them to Mrs Butt to dry, and fetch you Maggie's slippers."

"Thanks, Fred; that will be very kind."

I laughed to myself to see my brother figuring as a lady's man. I wondered how wet my boots might have been before it would occur to Fred to notice the fact! I am quite certain that my feet might be drowned before it would enter into his head to fetch my slippers.

The instant my brother had flown off with the wet boots in his hand, Helen Marsden came close up to me, with a sudden flush upon her pretty face.

"I have had a letter this morning, Maggie," and she pulled one out of her pocket; "it is from my cousin Frank."

She looked so radiant, and withal so full of confusion, as she spoke, that the meaning of it all seemed to me to be plainly written in her face.

I would have given anything—my ten fingers, my next quarter's allowance, my new Sunday bonnet—to have prevented the answering flush which painfully flooded my face, from my forehead to my chin. I pretended to look away out of the window.

"Yes?" I said; and a sick, miserable wretchedness came into my heart. She was going to tell me of her love, and of his.

"Here, take the note, and read it quickly," she said, thrusting in into my hand.

I pushed her back almost angrily.

"I—I read it?" I cried, in dismay; and then I stifled down my emotion, and added, in a tranquil voice, "I don't think you ought to show it me, Helen. Mr Warner would not like it."

"Not like it!" laughed Helen back. "Well, considering that the note is entirely about *you*, and that I am to have the answering of it for *you*,

I think the least you can do is to take the trouble to read it."

Wondering, trembling, with a strange new beating at my heart, I took the letter from her hand, opened it, and read,—

"DEAR NELL,—I can get twenty-four hours' leave next week, I think. I have a great mind to run down to you for the night. Will you ask Miss Orchester to say whether I shall do so or no? I shall not come if she will not make it worth my while. Tell her she is to decide.—Your affectionate cousin,

FRANK."

I sat quite still in a bewilderment of happiness. So it was *me* after all that he loved! I could not raise my eyes to hers, and my face burned and glowed, the little note shook in my trembling hands.

"Well?" cried Helen joyously.

"Oh! Helen, is it true?" I whispered softly.

"Quite true, you little goose!" she answered, kissing me. "Everybody saw it but yourself."

"But, Helen," I said wonderingly, "who would have thought it, when *you* were there, that any man would have looked at me?"

"I declare, Maggie, your modesty concerning yourself is so utterly irrational and unwomanlike that it makes me angry! Well, am I to say yes?

Tell me quick. Fred will be back, and I must be off. Is he to come?"

"Oh! of course," I answered, smiling; and then she kissed me again, and Fred came in with the slippers.

Ten minutes later she had her boots up again, from the kitchen fire, and started off home through the rain, accompanied by Fred, who insisted upon walking back with her.

"I have letters to write, so I can't stop," she said, laughing and nodding to me as she went, and I was left alone.

Alone with my happiness; for I realised now, all at once, that I loved him. I suppose he had loved me all the time, only I had not dared to think it. When I came to look back at that fortnight last Easter that he had spent with the Marsdens, when Fred and I were with them every day, a hundred little things which I had scarcely noticed at the time came back to me now with a new significance. There were looks, and tones of his voice, and half-finished sentences, which should have taught me the truth had I read them aright. How was it that I had misunderstood them all? Was it only that I was a novice to love's signals, or was it that I was indeed modest to an unwomanly degree, as Helen had said?

As I sat alone gathered up in the window-sill,

with my chin in my hands, full of these reveries, I suddenly caught sight of a closed fly coming up the avenue. I watched it curiously. It came up to the house, and stopped there, and it was empty. It had evidently been ordered from the town. I sat still and waited.

Presently, to my surprise, a portmanteau was brought out, and placed on the top of it. It was Mr Hardcastle's.

I jumped up joyfully. He was going, then! I ran into the passage, and hung eagerly over the bannisters. Below in the hall papa was wishing him good-bye. He stood all ready to start, with coat and hat in his hands, and shook hands with my father. I wondered whether he would ask to say good-bye to me. My father looked at his watch.

"I do not wish to hurry you, but if you want to catch the train—"

"Yes, I know, I must be off."

He shook hands again, and moved to the door. Then suddenly he made a step back, and laid his hand impressively on my father's arm.

"Remember," he said, "she must not be told of it till I write;" and the next minute he was gone.

I went back thoughtfully into my attic. Who was *she*, I wondered, and what was it that was not to be told to her?

CHAPTER IV.

HOW I FIND A LOVER.

"There's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream."—*Moore.*

A YOUNG woman, in a brown holland frock and a battered black straw hat, perched on a stile ; a field of yellow corn behind, plentifully besprinkled with poppies, and a young gentleman in the foreground leaning over the same stile in close proximity to the aforesaid young woman in the battered hat.

This is the picture I wish to present to your notice this fine July morning.

The *dramatis personæ* are Margaret Orchester and Francis Warner, and we are engaged in the not altogether unpleasing pastime of making love.

There is nothing new about it, I suppose,—nothing that is original, or interesting, or exciting to the world at large. Nobody cares to hear the vapid imbecilities which lovers all the world over repeat to each other, but which to each couple are so full of charm and wit and fascination, that each in turn thinks nobody has ever said anything like it before. For the first half-hour after a man and woman find out that they love each other, or think that they do, their words and their signs and their actions are probably

identically the same as those of nine-tenths of the lovers of the whole world, savage or civilised. I am not going to victimise my readers, therefore, with a detailed account of what Mr Warner and I have been saying to each other: it must be left to the imagination. Suffice it to say that we are incapable, by reason of the engrossing nature of our converse, of proceeding farther in our walk than the stile by the corn-field, and, having come to a standstill upon it, are as supremely and insanely happy there, as two people in that condition ever were before or after.

My lover is not very tall, and not particularly handsome; but he has a pleasant, sunburnt face, and a delightful smile, and a pair of the brightest brown eyes that ever charmed a woman's heart away. He is a sailor, and has all a sailor's open manner, and happy, sanguine temperament, and, like all sailors, he is going to get a ship some day. They all say so; but to how few, alas! the "some-day" ever comes. Frank has just made this not very original statement—that he will get a ship, and then, he triumphantly says,—"*then* we will be married."

"I am afraid we shall have to wait a long while," I say, with a sigh.

"What does that matter, darling, if we are true to each other? You will be true to me, won't you, Maggie?" he said, a little anxiously.

"Why, yes, of course." And then I add, laughing, "To begin with, nobody else will ever want to marry me."

"Why not?"

"Why should they? I am not a bit pretty, and I am very poor. How you could be so blind as to like me better than Helen—"

"Why, Helen is a child. Besides, it is not because you are pretty, but because I love you."

And the sweet flattery of his words ended upon my lips.

"For all that," I said, when I had slightly recovered from the confusion of this interlude,—
"for all that, I am not likely to be wanted by anybody else. Why, old Doctor Smee, and young Matthews, the banker's son, whom I have always detested, and that dreadful curate, with the weak eyes and the stammer, are the only unmarried men I ever see from one year's end to the other."

"Well, I dread the curate most," answered Frank, laughing. "You are so impressionable, you know."

"What impertinence, sir!"

And then there is a fresh pause, filled in—we all know how.

"Do you think your father will give his consent?" asks Mr Warner presently.

"Most improbable," I answer, shaking my head. "You know I don't get my own money till I am twenty-one, and we live upon it."

"What a shame! And what of Fred's?"

"Oh! that has always paid for his education, but now he is going to Oxford, and every penny of it will be wanted. You see papa has always counted upon my marrying a rich man, who will make him an allowance. And that, I fear, is not much like you."

"No—no—but still, when I get a ship—"

"Ah! yes; when you get the ship! But meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile, darling, suppose we say nothing about it. Helen and Fred, of course, must know; but what is the use of our setting everybody else against the thing, and getting forbidden to meet? I am not quite sure, you know, that my people would think it quite—quite prudent. Oh! don't draw yourself up, darling, in that ridiculous way! Of course they would think *you* far too good for me—any one would."

I doubted it, but forbore to say so.

"But," continued my lover, "I daresay they would say I ought to have waited; as I am a younger son, and have nothing but my profession to look to, they will think I ought to have waited to speak to you till—till—in fact—"

till I got a ship; and I daresay your father would think so too; but then very likely I shall be ordered off somewhere the other side of the world soon, and I couldn't have borne to leave you without having spoken to you, for fear, you know, of that weak-eyed curate! So perhaps it would be better—would you very much mind, Maggie, letting it be a secret for the present?"

He stood stroking my hand softly between his as he talked; and he spoke with a little hesitation, and kept his eyes fixed upon the hand he was caressing, as though he were pleading for something he was at heart a little bit ashamed of asking for. We were both of us very young; my lover was only four-and-twenty, but we thought ourselves very wise. I don't think that concealment was in either of our natures, but it seemed to us both that it was but a prudent thing to do; as Frank said, it would only cause our relatives to make themselves extremely unpleasant to us, and to forbid our engagement. And as it would make no difference to us in the end, for we were quite resigned to the necessity of waiting until we had something to marry upon, where was the use of bringing a family storm about our heads?

So we came to the conclusion that we would say nothing to anybody, but that we would re-

main true to each other until better times came; until Frank could, as he said, afford to claim me.

We sauntered home through the cornfields, with all the noonday sunshine smiling upon our happiness. We were young and hopeful; all our life lay still before us, and the divine elixir of love had but just touched our lips; we had had no time to taste the bitterness that lurks in that delusive draught; it was all new, and unknown, and passing sweet to us.

So, although we had to part at once, for Frank had only twenty-four hours' leave, and had to be back at Plymouth before night, we were not very sad, we had so much to make us happy.

We came through the fields into the road; and here it was we must say good-bye. Frank had to go back to the Marsdens', and I had to hurry home for fear of being late for luncheon.

"You are *quite* sure you will be true to me?" says Frank once more, as he kisses my glowing face for the twentieth time.

"Why, of course! How suspicious you are!" And I laugh a little. "After all, it is far more likely that you will be flirting with other people, sir. Sailors are proverbially unfaithful. Are they not popularly supposed to have 'a love in every port,' and to be as fickle as the winds and waves of their daily life? And you will be wandering

half over the world, whereas I shall be stranded here, where you leave me, at Follerton, for the next hundred years, unless you come and take me away."

"Don't make a joke of it, darling," says my lover, and there comes a look of pain into his eyes; "it is such intense reality to me; and somehow—you will laugh at me, perhaps—but I have got it in my mind that you will forget me. Is it a presentiment, I wonder?"

"Frank, how can you be so foolish?" And I cast my arms up about his neck.

And holding me thus close to his heart, my lover says again, with a sort of passion in his voice that half frightens me,—

"Be true to me—be true to me! Tell me that you will—let me hear you say it!"

"Yes, I will be true to you!" I answer earnestly, wondering a little at his persistence. "Why should you think I could be anything else? I will never forget you, and I will be true to you."

And before Heaven I meant it. There seemed to me to be no difficulty about it. He loved me, and I loved him. Why should we forget each other? It was impossible. He kissed me again, smiling, and well satisfied by my answer.

"After all, our farewell need not be so very tragic, Madge. I am sure to see you again be-

fore we sail, if we do sail. I shall come again to say good-bye to you, of course."

"Yes, you will come again," I answered confidently.

And so we part. I stand where he leaves me, watching him go down the lane under the flickering shadows of the beech-trees that fling their branches across the road, in the archway of greenery over his head. And again and again he turns back to smile and to nod to me as he goes, and I stand and wave my hand to him until a turn in the lane hides him from my eyes, and he is gone indeed.

I turn and saunter slowly home. Oh! my love—my love! had I but known how and when we should meet again, would I ever have let you go from my arms?

Already the web of my fate is weaving, slowly, silently, and surely.

"You are very late, Maggie," says my father, as I enter the dining-room, where he and my brother are already discussing the cold mutton and salad. "I wish you would learn to be punctual. Fred had to make the salad, and you know I detest Fred's salads; they are not fit to eat. When there is salad, you must be in time to make it. Where have you been?"

"In the fields," I answer, blushing hotly, as I take my plate of cold mutton meekly.

"The fields must have been warm. How hot you look!" says Fred, wickedly winking openly at me across the table, an exhibition of vulgarity which I endeavour to treat as though I had not seen it.

I help myself to Fred's salad. Papa is quite right; it is unspeakably nasty! all salt and vinegar.

"Has the second post come in?" I ask presently, by way of starting a fresh topic of conversation.

My selection of a subject is unfortunate. My father's brow becomes as black as night.

"I think second posts are the invention of the Evil One!" he says savagely; whilst Fred, who is cutting bread at the sideboard, makes pantomimic signs at me over our parent's head, by which I gather that he is not altogether in an angelic frame of mind.

The second post has evidently had an effect upon him the reverse of soothing—bills probably, I say to myself.

It is wonderful how irritable papa has been of late—everything and everybody seems to be perpetually rubbing him the wrong way. It used not to be so. Fred says it is ever since Mr Hardcastle's visit, and I almost think he is right. I could understand that gentleman's

presence being of a disturbing nature; but since he has been gone a week, why should papa not recover his equanimity? I did not rightly know what had been the upshot of that visit—truth to say, I had not very much cared. I had had other and more personal matters to engross my attention. I had, indeed, asked once whether anything had been settled, and my father had answered me shortly, No, nothing had been settled; but several projects had been discussed. I was not to trouble my head about it, said my father finally, and my head being more amusingly entertained, did not accordingly disturb itself any further.

Something, I supposed, was to be “sold out” of papa’s slender capital to meet Mr Hardcastle’s demands. I did not altogether understand the process; but it had taken place several times, and we had not been to my knowledge any the worse for it. As long as we were not turned out of the house, and as long as Fred went to college, I did not very much care; nothing else very dreadful was likely to happen to us. We were poor, of course, and our fare was of the simplest; but that we were used to: we had never known it otherwise; it did not disturb our happiness—Fred’s and mine. We ate cold mutton and salad, or ducks and chickens of our

own rearing, or bacon and beans when there was nothing better, just as they came, and did not trouble ourselves to desire better fare. We had our old home, and our father, and our strong, young health, and now I had my lover too, as a private and additional source of happiness. Why should I be miserable about money troubles which, I said to myself, really affect one's life so little?"

Oh! happy philosophy of nineteen! shall I ever again go back to that blessed unconcern, that unruffled indifference to life's future sorrows that was my portion in those days? Will old age, that deadens the heart and numbs the senses, bring back with it too the serene contentedness of youth?

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE ENEMY BARGAINED.

"I do perceive here a divided duty."—*Othello*.

"FRED, come here!"

My brother is crossing the hall with his hat under his arm, and his cricketing flannels on; I am coming out of my father's study, the door of which I carefully close behind me.

"What do you want? I am just off into Rivertown to play in the 'School against Town' match. I am late as it is. Hallo!" breaking off suddenly as he looks at me. "You look all knocked of a heap. What's up?"

"Just come here and look at me."

"My beloved sister, I have seen you several times before; if it is only to contemplate your charms—"

"Fred," I say solemnly, "you *must* have made a mistake."

"What about?"

"About my looks. Are you *quite* sure I am so ugly?"

"Well," regarding me doubtfully with his head on one side—"well, I have always thought you so."

"But you see everybody doesn't agree with you."

"Meaning Frank Warner, I suppose? You needn't blush so furiously. Of course I know you are spoons on each other."

"Fred, how vulgar you are!"

"Very likely. So he admires you, does he? Well, I don't," adds my brother decidedly.

"Just tell me why," I persist, with a real interest in the subject.

"Oh! to begin with, your nose turns up, and your mouth is half-a-mile wide, and your eyes are as round as marbles, and your head is like a

bramble-bush. I am very sorry, Madge; but I don't think you pretty."

"Then, am I clever?"

"I don't think so."

"I am certainly not accomplished."

"Decidedly not."

"Then will you have the kindness, Fred, to explain to me why two men in one week should wish to marry me?" I ask triumphantly.

"*Two!* Ye powers! who is the second?"

"Guess."

"Old Smee?"

"No."

"Young Matthews?"

"Pooh!"

"The curate?"

Then I laughed outright; for was not that the very identical triplet of rivals that I had so lately presented to Frank's jealous eyes?

"Not one of them. Pray guess again."

"Hopeless. I give it up," said Fred, shaking his head. "Don't waste my valuable time by asking me conundrums, Maggie. I never could guess them. Tell me at once."

"What do you say to Mr Hardcastle?" I exclaimed.

"Nonsense!"

"It's true," I say, nodding my head.

Great heavens ! " ejaculates Fred ; and the news is so astounding, that the cricket match goes clean out of his head. " He is old enough, in all conscience."

" But it is ridiculous ! " I cry, and then we both burst out laughing.

" Has he written to you ? But of course you will decline the honour ? "

" Oh, of course. No ; he wrote to papa, and the odd thing is, Fred, that I do believe papa thought I should say ' yes ' to him ! I can't understand it."

" Fancy your being married to ' the enemy ! ' What a joke ! " chuckled Fred.

" But it is queer of papa," I continued thoughtfully. " I really think he looked quite vexed when I laughed, and said it wasn't very likely that I should marry him."

" What did he say ? "

" Oh, he only told me he had a letter from Mr Hardcastle yesterday, and that he asked for my hand in marriage. Doesn't it sound silly ? An old man like that ought to know better than to talk such rubbish."

" And what did you say ? "

" I burst out laughing, and told papa it was perfectly absurd ; and then papa looked very grave, and told me to think it over, and not to decide things in a hurry. It is so odd of him to say

that, Fred; as if there could be any 'thinking over' required on such a thing as that: it is a preposterous idea! Only, what puzzles me is, *why* the enemy wants to marry me."

"Oh, that is his dodge, probably; he doesn't really want to marry *you*, only to pick a quarrel with papa."

"Very ingenious, Fred, but too obscure to be fathomable. Go off to your cricket, you silly boy, and try and think of something a little nearer the mark."

Fred went off shouldering his bat, and I was left alone smiling still to myself over the very ridiculous notion of Mr Hardcastle wanting to marry me. But although I smiled, I was not quite easy in my mind. I had loudly called it "absurd, ridiculous, preposterous." I had laughed to scorn the proposition which papa had laid before me, but the louder I laughed, and the more I declaimed against it, the more puzzled I became by the part taken by my father. It was evident that papa was taken aback by my absolute refusal: he had not apparently expected it. Probably Mr Hardcastle's "age" had not struck him in the same light as it did his young daughter. To papa, Stephen Hardcastle was an eligible suitor, rich, good-looking, and pleasant; that he was old enough to take very good care of a young wife, had not

probably struck him as anything but an additional advantage.

But then, I said to myself impatiently, I did not like him; even had there been no such person as Frank Warner, I should never have been in love with Mr Hardcastle, and to marry a man without loving him appeared to me in those days in the light of a heinous sin. Moreover, he did not, could not love me; he had never spoken to me of love; he had been very kind and very pleasant to me during his short visit, but there had been nothing of love in his demeanour. Why, then, did he desire to marry me?

Whilst I still stood there turning it over and over in my mind, the study-door opened behind me, and my father came out. He looked at me strangely, I fancied. There was something of deprecation and something almost of entreaty in his face.

"My dear," he said, with a little hesitation in his manner, "about what we were speaking of, there is no occasion to send an answer to-day, you know."

"I think there is every occasion, papa," I answered decidedly. "What is the use of waiting? When a thing has to be said that is not very pleasant, it is better said at once."

"You may, you very likely *will*, change your mind, Maggie."

"Utterly impossible!"

There was an old oak settle in the window, upon which I had seated myself; my father stood before me with that strange supplicating look in his eyes that disturbed me in spite of myself.

"Have you considered all the advantages of this match, Maggie?"

"Do you mean that he is rich, papa? Yes, I suppose he must be that. But I am not the sort of girl to be tempted by money. What are riches compared to happiness?" I exclaimed, rather grandiloquently.

"They have a good deal to do with it," answered my father; "it is, at all events, no objection to a man that he is rich."

"But if I don't love him, papa?"

My father was silent for a minute; he leant against the open doorway, and looked out over the park with its chestnut glades; there was a nervous movement about his fingers as he twisted his hands together, which was unusual to him—there was evidently some strong agitation in his mind about which I was utterly in the dark. When several minutes went by without an answer to my last remark, I said to myself with a little triumph that it had been an unanswerable one, and that my line of argument had been convincing: he had evidently

nothing to say. Just as I had come to this comfortable conclusion, my father turned and looked at me steadily.

"Maggie, since you cannot, or shall I say *will* not, understand, I shall be forced to speak to you with a plainness and distinctness which I would gladly, had I been able, have avoided. I have asked you to consider the advantages of this match. Have you considered the *disadvantages* of your refusal?"

"How, papa?" I was vaguely disturbed by his manner, yet knew not what I had to fear. "I suppose Mr Hardcastle can take 'No' like any other man? I daresay," I added contemptuously, "he has heard it said many times before: he is old enough."

"Pray, do not jest, Maggie; this is a more serious matter than you can imagine. Did I not tell you that this man—my creditor—was entering into arrangements with me to make my position more endurable?"

"Yes, papa," I answered, wondering still, but vaguely apprehensive.

"Do you not understand, child, that these arrangements hinge entirely upon *you*?"

"Upon *me*?" in intense amazement.

"Yes, yes, upon you: have I not said so? Why do you make me repeat my words? If you

marry him, he will let me off; I shall have nothing more to pay him to the end of my days; he will even make me an allowance; I shall be at peace—”

And then at last I understood it all. It was to be Shylock's pound of flesh! So much of fair innocent girlhood to be paid down in exoneration of so much interest past and future that was owing and to be owed upon the Follerton estate.

I did not speak a word. I sat very, very still, with my hands locked closely together, and my heart faint and sick within me. I think I must have been very pale; I know that the old Hall, and my father, and the sunny park slopes without, all became for a minute blurred and indistinct before my eyes.

“And if I should *not* marry him?” I said faintly, at last.

“Then—then he will urge the full extent of his rights. He will foreclose the mortgage; he will turn us out of Follerton; he will sue me for the interest. I shall be turned out into the world penniless,—a beggar!”

“And Fred?” I said, trembling.

“Fred! How do you suppose I could send him to college? We should have to live upon your money—yours and his; it only amounts to three hundred pounds a year together. No; there would be no college for Fred.”

I hid my face in my hands, shuddering. Presently my father spoke again, and there was still that tone of intense entreaty in his voice, and that look of silent supplication in his eyes, though he spoke in a constrained and measured manner.

"I don't think, my dear, now that I have explained this to you fully, that you will underrate the importance, the immense importance, of your decision. It is not a time to talk about such childish unrealities as being 'in love.' I daresay you have read a great many novels, and filled your head with a good deal of nonsense about love and so forth. But circumstances, my dear, have combined to make a woman of you before your time. You must put away these silly dreams, and look at life from a more reasonable and womanly point of view. You must reflect that there is nothing at all actually objectionable in Mr Hardcastle; he has been hard to me, is hard to me certainly, but he has never been unjust. I have no doubt he will be a kind and indulgent husband. He comes of a respectable, though not an exalted family; his birth is not what, had I been independent, I might have desired for my daughter. It is inferior to your own. But he has the education and manners of a gentleman; and in these days the social differences that were of vast importance when I was

young are thought but little of. There would be no degradation in the marriage. You would be rich, and wealth is a power second to none. I do not propose a sacrifice to you, my dear, for there can be nothing absolutely repugnant to you in such a match. And when you consider that you hold in your hands the future career of your brother—for you know that the only opening for him is that living which his godfather, Sir Frederick Wilmot, has in his gift, and which he has as good as promised to him—and how can he enter the Church unless he goes to college?—when you consider this, and also that your father is actually dependent upon you for house and home, and for salvation from a poverty only just removed above actual starvation, I don't think you will say that I am wrong in urging upon you to weigh this matter very carefully in your mind before you come to a decision which you might very likely repent of to your dying day."

"Ah! say no more—say no more, papa!" I cried, and burst into a passion of tears.

"I will leave you, Maggie. Pray think it over, and remember that duty comes before inclination," said my father earnestly, and retired into his study.

I fled out into the park. My heart was beating wildly; sobs that I could not control shook

me from head to foot. I flung myself down under the shadow of a great tree, and wept as I had never wept before.

"Oh! I cannot—cannot!" I cried aloud in my anguish, beating the ground on which I lay with my hands. "Oh! Frank—Frank, my darling! Oh! what shall I do? what shall I do?"

I sobbed and wept until I was weak, and weary, and faint. I prayed aloud, I moaned and bewailed myself; but there was no one to hear me, no one to take pity on me. I felt like a poor trapped animal caught in a cruel, pitiless snare.

By-and-by, when my tempest of tears had worn itself out, I sat up, and looked wearily at the familiar scene. There were the smooth, green glades, flecked with the shadows of the trees, spreading away on every side of me—the trees under which my forefathers had walked. Had any miserable ancestress of mine suffered as I was suffering now? I wondered—had any wretched girl, in the long-ago days, stretched herself upon the self-same grassy slope, and sobbed her heart out in hopeless despair?—had any such task been laid before her, the task of deciding betwixt her love and her duty?

Between the trees I could see the red-gabled old house sleeping in the afternoon sunshine, the pigeons whirling about among the tall

chimneys, the hens pecketing their way across the drive in front of the open hall door, the tabby cat curled up upon a window-sill, the canary in his cage singing away outside my bedroom. How home-like and familiar it all was! Could it be that all this would be taken from us at once, only because I was true to Frank? What had papa said?—"Duty before inclination." The words rung in my head with a reiteration that was painful almost to a physical degree.

"Duty before inclination!" I held my throbbing head in my hands, and repeated the words over and over again, till I felt quite weak and feeble with the effort of concentrating my mind upon what lay before me.

Little by little, however, the natural elasticity of youth and of a buoyant and sanguine temperament began to re-assert itself. There was no hurry, I said to myself. I need not have been so unhappy. Such an awful fate was sure to be averted somehow. The young can never quite believe in misery. Something, they think, will be sure to intervene between them and the thing they dread.

"It is impossible!" I said to myself. "Frank will get his ship—or, at all events, he will come back to me; he will save me somehow—and it is quite certain that I can never, never marry anybody else but him. Yes, that is quite certain."

I jumped up from the grass, and walked slowly back to the house.

"At any rate," I said aloud, "I will write to him, and tell him everything, and ask his advice. He will be sure to be able to help me. Perhaps papa can get some money for this dreadful interest in some other way. Somebody might lend it to him; and perhaps Sir Frederick Wilmot will send Fred to college himself, and then all will turn out well. I need not make myself miserable. 'Things are never so bad as one fancies they will be.'"

With which comfortable axiom I turned in at the house door, whence lately I had fled in such a paroxysm of despair, feeling almost happy again. I was so young! And something would surely happen to make everything all right!

I went up into my room, locked my door, took out my writing-case, and wrote a long letter to my lover.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW MY TROUBLES INCREASE.

"Struggling in the storm of fate."—*Pope*.

I WROTE my letter, and then I put on my hat, and went myself into the village and posted it

with my own hands. When I had done so, a weight seemed lifted off my mind.

After that I thought I would go to the Marsdens' and see Helen. Helen was Frank's cousin, and, though she was only seventeen, she was sympathetic and full of the liveliest interest in anything like a love affair, and to her I could talk about Frank.

Upton Hall was but a mile and a half from Follerton. It did not take me very long to get there. I found Mrs Marsden alone in the drawing-room. The tea had just been brought in.

"You have come to see Helen, my dear? She is out riding. I have been expecting her home for the last hour, and she is riding that little chesnut horse her father gave her. I know he is not safe, he shies so, and she never will let the groom go with her. It makes me very nervous."

Poor Mrs Marsden! Everything that Helen did made her nervous. She had fretted herself into a premature old age over her daughter; and her husband was very nearly as bad as herself.

He came in presently, and began fidgeting too, over the length of Helen's ride.

"She shall not go out again alone," he said, as he went backwards and forwards between the tea-table and the windows.

They were a thin, pale-looking couple. I always thought that they had worn themselves so, by the perpetual state of anxiety in which they spent their days.

It was, perhaps, little to be wondered at, for Helen was their only child, and they had lost four others in their childhood. Their painful anxiety over the one that had been left to them was touching, if one came to look at it in its right light, although to strangers it was apt to be rather tiresome and irritating.

"How do you think she is looking now?" said the mother, as she poured out my tea.

"Helen? Oh! I never saw her looking better. She has the colour of a rose!" I answered cheerily.

Mrs Marsden shook her head, and sighed.

"Ah! that bright colour is so deceptive! She has a nasty little hacking cough. I wonder you have not noticed it."

"I wish I had not let her go out alone," murmured Mr Marsden, in the background. "I dare say she has met one of those horrible traction engines, and the chesnut has bolted. Quite as likely as not."

Mrs Marsden uttered a cry, and struck her hands together in a sort of paroxysm of horror.

"Oh! Henry! How dreadful! Yes, yes; of course, it must be that! There was one in the

village only yesterday, and she must have met it. My poor darling may be lying at this minute a mangled heap at the bottom of a ditch! Oh, let us have the doctor here to meet her when she is brought back!"

I could not help laughing, although I felt it was unfeeling, at this tragedy which the worthy couple had so laboriously conjured up for themselves.

"I don't think I would trouble about the doctor just yet," I exclaimed, "for I hear a horse coming up the drive!"

The parents ran to the windows; and presently Helen herself appeared, looking wonderfully bright and pretty, walking the chesnut very slowly up the drive, in order to accommodate her pace to that of a young gentleman in cricketing flannels who was by her side, and who was none other than my own brother.

"Are you safe, my darling?" cried her father.

"Are you not utterly worn out by your long ride, my poor child?" exclaimed her mother.

"Yes, yes; of course I am safe, and I am not in the least tired," answered Helen, helping herself instantly to tea and bread-and-butter.

"How wonderfully soon the cricket match is over," said I. And I fancied that Fred looked somewhat sheepish upon finding me there.

He began at once an elaborate explanation of how he had just been bowled out, and how he had seen Helen skirting the cricket-ground, and how he had thought he would walk home that way, and how dull walking alone was, etc., etc.; all of which I thought extremely unnecessary and uncalled-for. As if anybody could want an excuse for liking to walk by the side of pretty Helen Marsden, in her faultlessly-made habit, looking as she always did—her very best on her chesnut horse.

“And so I came at a snail’s pace all the way from Rivertown,” interpolated Helen, cutting short his elaborate explanation. “Yes, Fred, your pace *is* that of a snail, and that is the reason I am so late. Give me the cream, mamma.”

Anything less like the interesting invalid which her parents always made her out to be, than Helen appeared, it would be impossible to imagine.

“Come upstairs,” she whispered to me presently; “I have something to say to you.”

I followed her up into her own bedroom—a little bower of lace and muslin and blue ribbons—so different from my own bare and ill-furnished attic. Helen shut the door behind me, and then turned to me with a face out of which all the smiles had fled.

“Oh, darling Maggie! I have such bad news for you.”

"Helen, what is it?" I faltered.

"The 'Antigone' is ordered to the West Indies."

H.M.S. "Antigone" was Frank's ship.

"When does she go? Have you heard from Frank? He will come and say good-bye, I suppose?" I exclaimed breathlessly.

"Oh! that is the worst part of it; they are off at once—the orders were most sudden—no one is to have leave."

"At once! What does that mean?—next week?"

"Oh! my poor darling Maggie, how am I to tell you? It is to-morrow they sail, to-morrow at daybreak. Here is his letter, and one for you inside it; take it and see for yourself."

I thrust the letters into my pocket: I could not read them then. I could not speak to my warm-hearted friend, who was almost in tears herself over my sorrows. I forgot all about Fred, who was downstairs waiting probably for me to go back with him. I went away by myself alone across the fields, the very cornfields where so lately we had parted so full of hope and happiness; and there at the stile, where my lover first told me of his love, I stopped to read his farewell letter, with my eyes half-blinded by my tears.

It was very short and not very clearly expressed. He was evidently in a great hurry; they

were going to sail for three years; he would write if he could, whenever he could; I was to keep up my heart, and not to forget him. He could not tell where he would be; he would send me his address as soon as he knew it himself. It was sad to leave without seeing me—but perhaps it was for the best, our parting would have been so painful; and then he bade me think of him and pray for him, and be true to him above all things.

When I had finished it, the letter had dropped from my fingers and fluttered unheeded to my feet. I leant over the stile and looked out over the waving corn; there was no longer any beauty or any brightness to me in the scene that only a week ago I had thought so fair.

“Three years! three years!” I said to myself drearily. Ah, what might not happen to me in three years! and would he get my letter before he started? To-morrow, at daybreak, they were to sail, the letter said, but there were always delays; they might be kept till the morning post was in. If he only got my letter, the letter so full of love and despair, of entreaties for help and advice, of eager requests to be allowed to make known our secret to my father, if he only received it, he would surely answer me speedily, and give me that succour which in my helplessness I craved from him.

He would get it; yes, I felt sure he would get it, I said to myself. Like a drowning person, I caught at this straw of comfort, and buoyed myself up with it.

I picked up my letter and went home slowly and with a heavy heart, and I waited.

A whole week went by bringing me nothing. My father asked me daily whether he should not write to Mr Hardcastle.

"I don't wish to hurry you, my dear, still—"

"Oh! not yet; not yet!" I cried, not knowing what it was I would do, and waiting still for some sign from Frank.

At last there came a letter for me, a big imposing-looking envelope, with "Her Majesty's Service" printed upon it. With a sinking heart I opened it: my own letter dropped out.

Although I might have expected it all along, I was so cast down by this event, that I could no longer keep my trouble to myself. I opened my heart to Fred.

"Oh! what shall I do, Fred—what shall I do?" I cried in my despair to him, as we wandered together round the kitchen garden that evening after dinner. "Shall I break my promise to Frank, and tell papa of our engagement? Perhaps then he will have pity upon me."

Fred looked very grave.

"You should not have made any engagement, Maggie," he said, in somewhat an autocratic manner. "After all, it is a very bad match, you know. Nobody would encourage either of you in keeping up such a hopeless affair."

"Fred!" I cried reproachfully, "I thought that *you* at least would have felt for me!"

"So I do," said Fred sententiously; "but when a person's difficulties are in a great measure brought on by their own mistakes, one cannot but feel that had they been decently prudent, everything might have been avoided."

"Mistakes!" I cried, almost beside myself with vexation and disappointment. "Can you possibly mean to say that you call my being engaged to Frank Warner a *mistake*?—you, who were so fond of him?"

"Oh, Frank is a good fellow enough!" said Fred carelessly, puffing at his pipe between words. "I don't object to him in the least as a brother-in-law—at least I should not if he could afford to marry—but as it is, had he asked my advice—"

"Which he did not do, thank goodness!" I cried angrily. "You will be wanting me to break it off and marry Mr Hardcastle next."

"It would be the very best thing you could possibly do," he answered earnestly.

By which I perceived that my father had succeeded in converting Fred at all events to his views.

For the first time it came across me that my handsome young brother was not so faultless as I had always deemed him. Was he not thinking about his college and his living, for which he was ready to sacrifice his sister's happiness? I pushed away the thought, that was almost a treachery to him, indignantly from my mind.

"Impossible!" I said to myself. But I sought his advice and assistance no longer. I left him among the gooseberry-bushes over his evening pipe, and went away slowly and sorrowfully into the house.

The next two days brought no change in my state of miserable uncertainty. I knew not where to turn. My father and my brother were against me, and my lover was "over the seas and far away." There was nobody to help me.

Suddenly there came into my mind a thought that seemed to me to be an inspiration. I would appeal to Mr Hardcastle himself! It was impossible, when he heard that I loved some one else, that he would wish to bind me to himself. If he was hard, he was at all events, as my father had said, just. I would write to him, and throw myself upon his mercy.

I was sitting alone in the drawing-room when this bright idea occurred to me. Fred had gone over to Upton. Papa was in Rivertown. It was market-day, and he never missed the mild and inexpensive dissipation which Saturdays afforded to him.

I was alone in the house. I jumped up to go to the writing-table, and, in my excitement, I upset my work-basket, and Fred's socks, which I was darning, tumbled out all over the floor.

"Mr Hardcastle, miss," said the voice of Eliza, the housemaid, behind me.

And "the enemy" was ushered in.

CHAPTER VII

HOW MR HARDCASTLE MADE A BARGAIN.

"But love can hope where reason would despair."
Lord Lytleton.

HE came in very quietly, and did not speak until the maid had closed the door behind him, then,—

"I am afraid I have startled you," he said, very gently.

I stood before him half-confused, half-defiant, with the colour coming and going in my face. I had not even thought of offering him my hand; I clasped the back of the chair from which I had

just arisen, with both hands, and all my needles and cottons and Fred's socks lay in a heap on the ground between us.

"Mr Hardcastle, what have you come for?" I asked; and perhaps I scarcely realised how cold and repellent was my manner.

A sudden flush came into his dark face; instead of answering my question, he stooped and began picking up my things and putting them back into my work-basket.

"You have upset your work," he said. "Let us put it straight first."

I watched him without offering to help him. He picked them all up—all the cottons, and the tapes, and Fred's old woollen socks that I had been darning—every one; and even at that minute there was a certain grim satisfaction in my mind at seeing him thus at my very feet employed in so lowly and homely a manner. I hoped that he felt humiliated; but I do not believe that he did.

"There," he said, when he had picked everything up, and had replaced my basket on the table, "now we can talk better. May I sit down? So you want to know what I have come for, Miss Orchester? Shall I tell you? I have come, since your father has been so long in answering my letter, to plead my cause in person."

"You use a wrong word," I broke in scornfully.

"It is not by *pleading* that you conduct your wooing."

"By what then?"

"By intimidation," I answered boldly, and then became suddenly half-frightened at my own boldness.

There was a curious sense of power about this man,—an instinctive influence of a strong will and an indomitable earnestness, which, in spite of myself, made me feel like a child in the hands of a giant.

He smiled a little.

"You use strong words," he said lightly. "That is a fault of youth. Let us see what it amounts to. In what have I used '*intimidation*,' as you call it?"

"How can I repeat the terms of this bargain which you wish to strike—this shameful bargain!" I cried, flushing hotly. "You are to free my father, as I understand, from all his engagements towards you; not from generosity; not because you pity him and would do what you could for him; not because he is old and helpless; but because you want your price, and that price?—Ah!" I hid my burning face in my hands. I could not say the degrading, humiliating words that made *myself* the price of this bargain.

"My dear child," he said, very gently, and bending forward in his chair as he spoke; "yes, of

course, it is a 'price,' if you choose to put it so. Do you think your father would take charity at my hands, stranger as I am? It is a price—the greatest he could offer me or that I could ask. Which do you suppose will be the debtor of us two, your father or I?"

As he spoke these last words, his voice suddenly trembled. I looked up at him half startled; his dark eyes, that I had once likened to those of an eagle, were fixed upon me with an intensity that filled me with surprise, and as they met my own they softened all at once into something that I had never seen in them before. My eyes fell under that searching look, and my heart was suddenly filled with a vague trouble.

What did he mean? I could not understand him.

He watched me, as I felt rather than saw, for a few minutes in silence, and then he spoke again.

"You have a tell-tale face," he said. "There is something more on your mind. Will you not trust me, my dear, and tell me what it is?"

His voice, quiet and kind, and almost fatherly in its tone, re-assured me. In spite of all, I felt again as I had felt before, that the man was not a bad man—just, if hard, as my father had said. I recollected that I had meant to write to him, and to appeal to his sense of right. I would do it now.

"Oh!" I cried, clasping my hands together, "I will tell you. I believe you mean to be kind. You will not betray me if I give you my confidence. You will perhaps tell me what I ought to do. Mr Hardcastle, how *can* I listen to—what you want to ask of me? I am not free; there is some one else—some one who has gone away trusting in me, who loves me, whom I love—"

I could say no more. I turned away lest he should see my glowing face and the tears that coursed over my hot cheeks. It was terrible to me to have to tell my secret to this man.

"Yes," he said, in a cold, measured voice, "I understand. And this man who has gone away, you say, trusting you, who loves you, and whom you love—this man to whom apparently you are engaged without your father's knowledge, he cannot, I suppose, afford to marry you?"

"No, not yet," I answered, through my tears; "not for a long time. He has gone for three years. Perhaps when he comes back—"

"Miss Orchester," said my companion gravely, "when I was a young man, it would have been thought a dishonourable thing to tie down a young girl for an indefinite period, without the consent of her friends."

I looked up angry and indignant, but something in his quiet, serious face restrained me from saying

what I felt; and besides, I was not altogether sure that he was not right. For the first time a doubt of Frank's discretion, if nothing more, came into my mind.

"I daresay my notions are old-fashioned," he continued, "and that all these codes of gentleman-like feeling and honour are changed now-a-days; but I think if you were to put the case to your father, that he would agree with me."

I jumped up suddenly, and began walking up and down the room.

"Oh! what does it matter?" I cried wildly. "How can it make any difference when he—he loves me, and you don't care? Why can you not think of some other plan,—some other way of being good to my father?" and then, foolish, impulsive girl that I was, I knelt down suddenly by his side, and clasped my hands together, resting them on the arm of his chair. "Oh!" I cried, "since you are strong, be merciful; do not sacrifice my life. What can it signify to you? There are so many women in the world, why must you go out of your way to take me? There are others who are beautiful whom you might love; but I—I am nothing to you."

He was evidently deeply moved by my words and by my attitude. He took both my hands between his own, and held them tight.

"Why do you tell me that I don't care?" he said brokenly. "What are other women to me? I want *you*. Oh! child, child, don't you see that I love you?"

"You *love* me?" I repeated, almost blankly, looking up at him in a bewilderment too intense to admit of confusion at the avowal.

He loved me! If Mr. Hardcastle had announced to me that I was an heiress in my own right,—that somebody had left me a colossal fortune,—that a royal prince desired the honour of my hand, I doubt whether I could have been more utterly amazed than I was by those simple words.

He loved me! Good heavens! how, when, and where had this miracle taken place? What had I done to the man that he should love me?

"Yes," he said, with a sudden abandonment of passion, more striking in him than it would have been in one less quiet and self-controlled; "yes; do you not see it? Have you not understood it? Do you think, because my hair is grey, that I cannot feel,—because I am old enough to be your father, that my eyes cannot see your beauty? Child, don't look so bewildered! Don't you believe me?"

I rose slowly from my knees. I daresay I looked bewildered. I know I felt utterly

confused and dazed by this wonderful thing. I passed my hand over my eyes with the gesture of one who seeks to awaken from a dream.

"But why—why is it? Mr Hardcastle, you *cannot* mean it; there is nothing about me. I am not pretty."

He leant back in his chair, and laughed, looking up at me as I stood before him.

"Who told you so? Was it the other man? He has bad taste."

"Oh! no—no," I answered quickly, and a little angry with him for the allusion. "Fred always says—"

"Ah! *Fred!*" with a deprecating wave of his hand; "brothers are proverbially bad judges. Well, what does Fred say?"

"Fred says my nose turns up, my eyes are like marbles, my head is like a bramble bush, and my mouth is a yard wide!" I answered, quoting my brother's latest list of complimentary observations, and laughing as I did so.

He jumped up suddenly, and caught hold of my hands.

"Shall I tell you what *I* think?" he said, in a low, passionate voice, drawing me nearer to him.

"Oh! no, no!" I cried, breaking away from him in terror.

He let me go, dropping my hands and laughing a little.

"Poor little child! I won't frighten her. Never mind your looks, little Maggie, they are enough to turn many a poor fool's head, young and old! The question is now—now that we are friends, you and I—what we are to settle."

"It is settled, is it not? Have I not told you that I am engaged? How can there be anything more to say? I am very sorry, Mr Hardcastle," with a sudden confusion, "if—if as you say you care for me, but you must see that I cannot, cannot do as you wish."

"And I am to press my claims against your father then, to turn you all out of Follerton, and to prevent Fred from going to college?"

"Oh! Mr Hardcastle, how cruel you are!" I exclaimed bitterly.

"Am I cruel?" he said tenderly. "My little girl, I think not. You see *he* 'the other,' has stolen a march upon me; perhaps he has got your heart."

"Perhaps, indeed!" indignantly.

"Perhaps he only thinks he has. Please take my view of the question, just for the sake of argument. He has, as you say, your love, and you imagine he loves you. Well, against that strong position I have got only two weapons wherewith to carry on the warfare: the one is that

practical hold which I have over your family; the other and perhaps the most effectual, is *time*."

"How do you mean? What can time do?" I said uneasily.

He laughed a little.

"Never mind; I shall know what to do with it. Do you think I shall ever give you up, my beautiful darling?" and then suddenly controlling himself with an effort, as though he regretted having given way for one instant, he continued calmly,—“Look here, Miss Orchester, I am going to make a proposition to you. I will meet you half way; I will waive your father's debt to me for the present; I will treat him exactly as though you had given your cordial consent to marry me; I will exact nothing from him; he shall live on here in peace. I will even make him an allowance to pay Fred's college expenses, provided that you on your part will agree to defer your answer to me. You shall have time—oh! I do not care how much time—six months, a year if you like, in order to see if you cannot learn to like me, and to forget that other man who has bound you to himself so—so imprudently, shall I say? I only ask you to *try* and love me. What do you say—shall it be a bargain?"

"Oh! you are too good,—too generous!" I

cried; "it is not right that I should make such an agreement with you, knowing, as I do, that it would be impossible—"

"If you find it impossible in the end, you shall tell me so in a year's time—two years if you like. But say no more now. Give me a trial, for pity's sake."

What could I say to him? Too surely I felt that by consenting, I was but weaving a strand of the web in which I should become too fatally entangled in the end to draw back; too certainly I knew that to accept benefits from this man, was but to put myself more completely into his power, to leave my destiny more entirely in his hands. But what was I to do? It was at all events a respite, a loophole out of my dilemma, a middle way by which I could escape for the present.

I said to myself that things could be no worse, at all events, than they were now; that indeed they might well be better; that some unforeseen piece of good luck might happen to bring Frank home, to enable him to claim me, to give him his promotion, and with it the means to support a wife. In any case, I should be true to him—that was a matter of course; and if Mr Hardcastle was foolish enough to enter into such a one-sided bargain with me—

why, that was his affair, not mine, and it would be impossible for him to blame anybody but himself for the inevitable consequences.

In the end I consented. He thanked me gravely and courteously ; he was too clever to show any undue elation or triumph at this concession, although I think that he must have known better than I did, how great a step in his favour it was.

So I suppose the spider understands, when the doomed fly, whose capture he has decided upon, first sets its hesitating feet upon the furthestmost edge of the web, that is in the end to be its destruction.

"And now," he said, "I am going back to the station. I am not going to force my presence upon you just now. I shall write to your father when I get back to town. By the way, Miss Orchester, I should like to introduce you to my mother. You will not object to know her, I suppose?"

"Oh no."

I had not even known that he had a mother before. I did not suppose that knowing her would hurt me. I did not quite see how the acquaintance was to be made; but that was a detail into which I did not trouble myself to inquire.

"Good-bye, Mr Hardcastle."

"Good-bye, Miss Orchester."

He raised my hand to his lips with infinite respect, and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW I ENTER LONDON SOCIETY.

"A feast of fat things."—*Isaiah*.

DECEMBER in Harley Street. Without, a murky yellow fog, and a chill, ceaseless drizzle; within, the gloom and darkness of a London drawing-room, scarcely relieved even by the warmth of a glowing fire; an old lady sitting doing nothing by the table, and a young girl doing ditto by the window.

The room is large and handsomely furnished. Even in the dull afternoon light the richness of the red satin damask, the glitter of the gilt picture frames, of more value than the very inferior paintings they enclose, and the costliness of the heavy curtains and *portières* can be estimated. A round table in the middle of the room, covered with a red velvet cloth; a round ottoman behind it; a marble console, with a gigantic mirror, bound the horizon in one direction; crimson satin chairs, surmounted by abominable crotchet antimacassars that torture the male mind unspeakably by tumbling out of their places at the slightest provocation; cut-glass chandeliers depending from the ceiling; ornament tables of dark mahogany, bearing white alabaster statuettes under glass shades, of detestable art and

doubtful decency; and far away in the distance, more round tables and velvet cloths, more red satin chairs and console tables, more alabaster statuettes and tall mirrors in elaborately carved and gilded frames, stretching away interminably into the dim distance of the back drawing-room.

It was all solid, substantial, and very expensive, and it was all unspeakably, frightfully, hideously ugly; and there are several thousands of drawing-rooms in our enlightened metropolis furnished exactly and identically like it.

"Maggie!"

"Yes, Mrs Hardcastle."

"Are you still there, my dear? How dark it is getting! I think I must have had a little doze. I wonder why they don't bring us the lamp. I suppose they are all so busy. You know I have a dinner-party to-night?"

"Yes, Mrs Hardcastle," I answer, with a smile.

It is at least the fourth time I have been informed of the impending event during the last two days. A dinner-party was evidently a very great episode indeed in the household in Harley Street.

How it was that I, Margaret Orchester, came to be staying with old Mrs Hardcastle in Harley Street is a story which I myself feel utterly unequal to relate. Many and varied were the incidents, which, insignificant in themselves, yet all

bearing in the same direction, like straws upon the current of a stream, tended to bring about this totally unforeseen and entirely extraordinary event.

Yet so it is that in November, four months after I had parted with my lover, four months after the day when Stephen Hardcastle had told me that he loved me, I find myself here in Harley Street the guest of his mother.

From that day indeed the whole of my life became gradually and insensibly altered. To begin with, Fred went to college; he embraced me fervently and even enthusiastically before he left. He told me that I had been the making of him, and that I was the best of sisters, and the greatest of bricks. I shrank almost guiltily from these expressions of affection; for did I not know full well what they meant? And this parting, which I had dreaded through all the years of my childhood as the direst misfortune that could befall me, was actually almost welcome to me, and I was unspeakably relieved when it was over and he was gone.

For Fred had now entirely recovered from his original dislike of the family "enemy;" he never failed to let me understand that he considered me already as good as engaged to Mr Hardcastle. Neither did my father. It was in vain that I explained to them that Mr Hardcastle himself had not bound me in the very least; that he had left

me free as air,—at liberty to refuse him utterly and finally at any minute ; and that, moreover, I intended to refuse him, and that he pretty well knew it. My father would only say,—

“If you *should* do so, Maggie, all I can say is that you will have behaved in the most dishonourable way to our generous friend, and that the dishonour will rebound upon myself, who have consented to accept his benefits under the express understanding that you are prepared to ratify your part of the contract. It is not many men who would so nobly give in to your girlish whim of waiting for an indefinite time, when there is really nothing to wait for. I am quite sure that you will not end by bringing disgrace upon your father.”

“To say nothing of spoiling your brother’s chances for life,” would add Fred.

So it was that, when my brother wished me that affectionate farewell, and went away to Oxford, I was actually glad.

The weeks passed away, and I saw little of Mr Hardcastle. He did not weary me with attentions or frighten me with expressions of affection. In point of fact, he did not make love to me at all, and he came so seldom, that almost insensibly I began to look for his coming, and to be glad when I saw him.

Little by little his influence gradually stole over

my life. I learnt to appeal to him in little things, to defer to his opinion, to do what I knew would please him. He was fond of music, so I set to work to practise up my scales, and got out my old music-books, which had been long neglected and laid aside, in order that when he came to Follerton I might sing to him the quaint old English songs that he was fond of listening to in the half light of the summer evenings. He would sometimes stand behind me and correct me, telling me how and where to alter the time or the expression, and evincing a considerable knowledge of music in his remarks. He would talk to me in a kind, almost parental manner, that quieted my nervousness and lulled my suspicions of his good faith towards me. Had he been lover-like in his demeanour, I must have loathed and hated him. As it was, I began to like him very much. So it was that when one day he brought me a letter from his mother, inviting me to pay her a visit in London, the invitation was somehow accepted. Much about the same time Sir Frederick Wilmot wrote to ask my father to go and stay with him. Papa was glad to go; and as I could not be left alone at home, it was only natural that I should remain in Harley Street as long as he was away.

All this time I have heard nothing of my lover. No letter has come to me from him; no answer to

the despairing appeals I have written to him. I love him as much as ever; I say to myself that I am as true to him as I ever was; but insensibly I have grown weary and out of heart by his long, unbroken silence. I have grown tired of asking myself why he does not write. I have wept at night upon my bed until my eyes have ached with my tears, and my heart has grown numb and deadened with my grieving; and now a dull, quiescent apathy has crept over me. It is not that I care less, but that I am so tired of being miserable.

Perhaps Frank has ceased to care for me; perhaps he is too busy or too well amused to take the trouble to write to me; perhaps even he regrets that hasty engagement with a penniless girl, who can bring him nothing but her love. And, meanwhile, there is that other, always there, always ready to do my bidding, to forestall my lightest wish, always deferring to me with that unspoken flattery of manner which is the sweetest incense that a woman can receive. He was always there; and Frank was—where? Somewhere on the other side of the world. Is it not very true "*les absens ont toujours tort?*"

Another event had taken place, which had put the finishing stroke to my utter severance from Frank Warner.

The Marsdens had let their house and gone

abroad. Helen's fond parents had suddenly discovered that her chest was delicate, and Dr Smee, who was a shocking old time-server, had by hook or by crook been induced to say that it was desirable that she should be taken to a warm climate. The truth of the matter was, I believe, that Helen was determined to hunt, and that her parents, who would have been fretted into their graves by the middle of the hunting season, had she been able to carry out her determination, resolved to take her out of reach of temptation by carrying her off abroad. So the house was let, and to Italy they went.

Before their departure, Helen had asked me not to mention Frank in my letters. She was afraid, she said, that she might get scolded if her parents found out that she was in the secret of my engagement. They might think she had helped to bring it about; for even Helen appeared now to be convinced of the great imprudence and undesirableness of the connection.

"Of course, if I hear anything of him, I will let you know. But please don't mention him when you write," she said.

I was a little bit vexed with her for her foolish fears, and the end of it was, that after one letter in answer to hers announcing their arrival at Paris, I did not write to her at all.

So I went up to stay in Harley Street, where Stephen Hardcastle came to visit his mother almost every day; and I grew fond of the old lady; and the chains that were forging themselves about me grew stronger and stronger every day. For she was a dear old lady; so small, so delicate-looking, so gentle in her manner, and so full of little fussiness over her young guest, that it was impossible to help liking her.

It was such a treat to her to have a young girl to stay with her: such a thing had never happened to her before. "And I have heard so much of you from my Steevie," she would say; for "my Steevie" was the pivot upon which her whole life revolved,—the centre sun of her gentle existence. He was so tall, and strong, and handsome, and she so small and fragile, with her soft, wrinkled face, and only the dark, piercing eyes in common, which were to the full as bright and keen in the old lady as in her son. It was pretty to see them together, the little old woman ordering him playfully about, the eyes, full of love and adoration, following him devotedly wherever he moved, and he always courteous and gentle, and yet always managing to get his own way.

I could not help liking him the better for his manner to his mother, and insensibly I began to listen with interest and sympathy to her stories

of his goodness and his talent,—how bright and full of promise had been his youth, and how noble and praiseworthy was his manhood.

I began to feel that Stephen Hardcastle was too good for me.

So the visit to Harley Street was beginning to be productive of results. The good lady had but few means at her command of entertaining a young lady ; yet she exerted herself to her utmost to amuse me. Every day she drove me out in her brougham ; she took me to picture-galleries without number, and to every shop where she could find an excuse for buying me some little trifle as a present. I went the round of the museums. I exhausted the delights of the bazaars. I was taken to German Reed's, and to the Tower, to the Monday populars, and to Westminster Abbey ; and every night " Steevie " came to dinner—that was the crowning delight of all, in Mrs Hardcastle's estimation. What could a girl want more ? And indeed, to my little rustic self, brought up in the wilds of the country, whose only dissipation hitherto had consisted of an occasional county ball, a few cricket and lawn-tennis meetings, and an indefinite number of penny readings, the varied list of amusements which my kind hostess had provided for my edification appeared indeed to be an enchanted and brilliant pro-

gramme. But her labours on my behalf did not end here. A dinner-party was to be given in my honour. Fifteen persons, exclusive of "Steevie," who was, of course, *de rigueur* on such an occasion, were to have the honour of encountering my small and insignificant self on that evening.

I am sorry to say that I was ungrateful enough to look forward to the banquet with anything but pleasure. I gathered that the guests would, most of them, be over fifty, and that all of them were either barristers, merchants, or members of Parliament and their wives.

"A frumpy lot of old fogies?" I said to myself scornfully, with all the arrogance of youth. "And who is to take me in to dinner?" I ventured to ask of my hostess, when she had imparted to me these details.

"A very nice young man, my dear—in fact, he is one of the few young men I know, now that I am growing an old woman—a Mr Harford; he is very clever, I believe, and I hope you will have a pleasant dinner."

I felt relieved to hear that somebody young had been specially provided for me, and I went up to array myself for the feast with a lighter heart.

I was very late indeed in coming down. My dress tore as I was putting it on. Mrs Hardcastle's maid had to be summoned to my assistance. After which

my rebellious locks refused to be smoothed into their right places, and the flowers which Mr Hardcastle had sent to me in the afternoon, lovely exotic blossoms that must have cost a fortune, could not be made to decorate my head with anything like grace or beauty. I thrust them hastily into the front of my dress, and catching up my gloves ran hurriedly downstairs.

The room was quite full when I came in. Dames—some portly, some scraggy, in gorgeous silk and satin gowns and much be-flowered heads, with strings of diamonds round their ancient throats—occupied every prominent seat in the room; their lords, bald-headed and pompous, or be-wigged and melancholy, stood grouped about in the vacant space in front of the fire. I came in very gently, but not so gently but that Stephen Hardcastle turned quickly round and came eagerly forward to meet me. He led me to a low seat by the fire, which I think he had carefully preserved for me, and introduced me to a lady in an adjoining arm-chair, who put up her glasses at me, and remarked,—

“Very unpleasant weather.”

“Very,” I responded; and there being nothing else to say about it, we relapsed into silence.

Mr Hardcastle had moved off among his mother’s guests. I amused myself by looking

out for my particular man, the "young man" who was to take me down to dinner; but was instantly persuaded that he could not have arrived—there certainly was not a single gentleman present who in any way answered to my ideas of youth.

Mrs Hardcastle and I evidently differed, however, upon this knotty point.

Dinner being announced, Mr Hardcastle walked off with the fattest and oldest and most diamond-decked dowager in the room; and his mother swiftly brought up somebody to me who made me a bow, and carried me off on his arm.

Good heavens! was this her idea of a "young man"—this individual with a bald head, and spectacles, and a yellow beard? I daresay poor Mr Harford might not have been more than thirty-eight, but to me he was a very fogie indeed.

We settled down into our places at the dinner-table with the usual little flutter of indecision and uncertainty, and for the first few minutes soup appeared to be more the order of proceeding than conversation.

The first pangs of hunger being somewhat assuaged, the convivial Briton, as represented by the eight middle-aged and elderly gentlemen present, bethinks himself of the female whom he has in charge. A gentle hum of mild talk

begins to circulate timidly round the table. My "young man," however, is evidently hungry, and is determined to finish his soup before devoting himself to the juvenile and no doubt uninteresting-looking partner of his fate. I catch Mr Hardcastle's eye at the bottom of the table, and he smiles at me. He is my one friend, I say to myself, in all this concourse of strangers—there is a pleasant sense of sympathy in this stolen glance. At this minute my neighbour wipes his mouth with his napkin, and turns towards me.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW I MAKE A DISCOVERY.

"Let it serve for table talk."—*Shakespeare.*

"**AHEM!**" begins Mr Harford, clearing his throat and surveying me scrutinisingly through his spectacles.

I become all polite attention.

"Have you read that very clever article in the *Contemporary* on the 'Development of Inorganic Matter?'"—is the bomb-shell which the talented person launches at my devoted young head.

"N—no—I am afraid—I have not—yet." The last word is cast in as a sop to the Cerberus who is regarding me.

"Perhaps you have not seen this month's *Contemporary*?"

"Oh yes, Mrs Hardcastle has it upstairs. I saw the article you speak of, but I passed it over."

"Ah! you did wrong; you should read it."

"Should I? I tried to, but I thought it seemed so *very* dull."

"I am sorry you thought that," said Mr Harford gravely, and, as it seemed to me, severely. And then after a pause of a minute he said, with apparently a deep dejection of soul, "My brother wrote it."

"Oh!" I gasped, and would, had it been possible, have thankfully subsided under the table, "I am sure I beg your pardon."

"Pray, don't mention it," with a stern politeness.

"You see," with a forlorn hope of making matters better, "I am not clever enough, I am afraid. I could not see the sense—that is to say, the meaning of it; it is my fault, of course."

"Serious reading is always improving to any mind," said my companion severely, and I felt snubbed indeed.

"But I *do* sometimes read serious things, I do indeed," I hastened to say. "In that very review there was an article on 'Woman's

Rights,' that I read straight through without skipping any of it; it amused me very much."

"Yes, I saw it; it was not badly written—rather sketchy though."

"Oh! I thought it very amusing. Did your brother write that, too?"

"No; he never writes upon trivial subjects."

Fancy a man who considered "Woman's Rights" a trivial subject! I felt awed, and became speechless.

"What is your opinion upon it?" he asked me presently, with an evident condescension of manner.

He was apparently, with much pain and labour, bringing his great mind down to my humble level.

"Of 'Woman's Rights,' do you mean?" I answered, scared by so very comprehensive a question, and feeling like the lady who was suddenly asked at an evening party what she thought of the British constitution. "I—I don't think I have thought much about them—in fact, I don't know very well what our rights are. I think we make quite enough out of our wrongs!"

A laugh from the end of the table suddenly told me that Mr Hardcastle had been listening to me.

"You are quite right, Miss Orchester," he cried to me, across the intervening space. "If you women only stick to your wrongs, and leave the

rights to us, I will guarantee you to have the best of it; that is a new view of the subject."

But Mr Harford turned from me deeply disgusted. I fancy he thought I had endeavoured to snub him, although nothing was further from my intentions. He addressed himself to the lady on his right hand, and shortly afterwards I heard them both in full cry upon "Inorganic Matter," a subject which was evidently too near to his heart to be relinquished lightly.

Left to myself, I applied myself silently for some minutes to the "*Ris de veau à la Bordelaise*" which was upon my plate, after which, my mortal appetite for this dainty having been satisfied, I began looking about the table. When nobody talks to you at a large dinner-party, there are a variety of ways in which you may, with a little ingenuity, procure entertainment for yourself in a manner not at all taken into account by the host at whose table you sit. You may, to begin with, pair the guests off into couples; you may settle whether the lady with the large head and the fishy eyes belongs to the gentleman with the aldermanic development, or to the one with the tulip ears and the eyeglass; whether the parson who said grace is the husband of the lady who is pulling the character of the fashionable beauty of the day into ribbons, or of the lady who thinks the

whole bench of bishops ought to be annihilated; whether the woman with the diamonds is the wife of the man with the chess-board on his shirt, and whether she of the black ringlets and the rouge, appertains unto he of the wig and the false teeth.

These little matters settled—erroneously probably, but at all events to your own satisfaction—you may, if you be of a mathematical turn of mind, calculate how many square feet the material of the united gowns of the ladies present would cover if sewn together and laid out flat upon the ground; and if you are highly imaginative, you may speculate upon the personal appearance of the company present, should each person suddenly be made to change noses with his next-door neighbour. On the present occasion I exhausted one after the other all these sources of light amusement, and then I began to wonder what their names were. What were the odds as to there being a Smith or a Jones present? If not also a Brown or a Robinson?

In furtherance of this last train of thought I discovered that each person carried his or her name in front of their plates on a card decorated with fat boys guiltless of garments, who brandished stuffed capons and rounds of beef upon pitchforks—culinary cupids they might be called. I straightway began to strain my eyes with more or less success across the table in order to read topsy-

turvy the names of the persons opposite to me. I had already triumphantly discovered a Jones and almost made out a Robinson, when a loud laugh attracted my attention to my left-hand neighbour. This gentleman, who had been much occupied with the lady whom he had taken down to dinner, had not hitherto bestowed any notice whatever upon myself. And beyond the fact that I had incidentally remarked that he was elderly and broad-shouldered, and that I had already some time ago exchanged his aquiline nose for the turned-up corresponding feature of the old lady opposite, where it presented—to the lively eyes of my imagination—an irresistibly comic effect, I had on my part taken no notice of him.

Now all at once he leant back on his chair laughing loudly and heartily, and turning suddenly to me, said,—

“That is a good story, is it not?”

Not having heard the story in question, I could but politely express my regret at having missed it, and he was beginning to relate it again for my benefit, when, with a sudden hope that he might be the missing “Brown” of the familiar trio, I cast my eyes upon the little card before him, and there I saw a name which made my heart first stand still and then bound on again wildly and tumultuously, for on it was inscribed, “*Mr Warner.*”

What might have been the nature of that entirely original and highly laughable *bon mot* which he was about to relate to me, I was destined never to know, for cutting short with scanty ceremony the preliminaries of the story into which he was just entering, I exclaimed excitedly,—

“Pray forgive me for interrupting you, but I see your name is Mr Warner. I know some one—a gentleman, I mean—of that name. I wonder if you know him,—if you are any relative?”

“And what may be this gentleman’s name?”

“He was staying near us in the country, with the Marsdens; he is gone away now for some time; his name was Frank—Frank Warner,” I said confusedly, and blushing hotly as I spoke my lover’s name to this stranger.

I fancied that he looked at me rather curiously.

“Oh! indeed, so you know Frank? Oh yes, I know Frank very well—very well indeed, I may say.”

“Are you any relation to him?” I asked timidly.

He smiled.

“Well, yes, I suppose I may call myself his relative, Miss—Miss Orchester,” glancing at my card for information. “I have the honour of being that young gentleman’s father.”

"*You!* Really? Oh! how glad I am!" I cried, flushing up all over my face with pleasure and delight, and forgetting every prudential consideration in the joy of my discovery. Now at last I should hear news of him!

The extremely attentive and scrutinising way in which old Mr Warner looked at me checked my outburst of excitement. I stammered, and became confused.

"I mean, of course, it is pleasant to meet anybody one knows something of, and—he—Mr Frank Warner—was a great friend of my brother's, and my father liked him too; and we have had no news of him since he went away; and I should be so very glad to hear about him. Is he quite well?" I added anxiously.

"Quite well when I last heard of him. So you know that young rascal Frank? A terrible fellow with the ladies is Master Frank!"

"I don't wonder that he is popular," I said rather hotly; somehow, I did not like that last remark.

Mr Warner played with his ice-spoon, balancing it upon the edge of his plate; and he appeared to be so engrossed with the effort that he did not raise his eyes to my face as he went on speaking.

"Oh! popular enough in all conscience! He

is the most impressionable fellow alive, is Master Frank. He is always tumbling in and out of love; it's a regular disease with him. He has been at it ever since he was sixteen! It becomes comical at last, you know, to the eyes of a practical father at least, because he always wants to marry them all. He'd have had a dozen wives by this time if I had let him! However, I hope now he will marry and settle down steadily."

The spoonful of pineapple-ice that I was swallowing was not colder than my heart as I listened. I had not heard much from Frank about his father—our courtship had been so short, and the days of our wooing so few; but I remembered his alluding to him as being rather an autocratic and stern-hearted old gentleman, and certainly he appeared to me in a truly detestable light.

It was not a true description of his son's character that he gave me; it was flippant and odious; and, above all, did I not know it to be utterly and entirely false? But it made me uncomfortable all the same to listen to; and what did he mean by saying that he hoped Frank would marry and settle down now?

I steadied my foolishly-fluttering heart, gulped down the remainder of my ice—I have always hated pineapple-ice ever since — and spoke to

him again, in a voice as unconcerned as his own.

"Where is your son now?"

"Oh, he is in Sicily—at Palermo, I believe."

"What! no farther than that?" I exclaimed, in astonishment. "Why, I thought—"

"Oh yes," he said, interrupting me quickly. "He meant, as I daresay he told you, to go Heaven knows where—half round the world, I believe; but he never got farther than Malta."

"But," I began, bewildered, and a whole string of questions rushed into my mind. What of his ship? Where was the "Antigone"? Had he left her? Was he on sick leave? or was it possible that he had given up his profession?

But at that minute Mrs Hardcastle bowed to the dowager in diamonds, and the ladies, with much rustling and commotion, arose from the table. My questions remained unasked and unanswered.

"You see," said Frank Warner's father, as he politely pushed back my chair and made room for me to pass—and this odious old gentleman actually put his finger to his nose and winked—"there is an *attraction* there; there is the pretty cousin, Miss Helen Marsden!"

CHAPTER X.

HOW MR HARDCASTLE WAS TEMPTED.

"Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive."

W. Scott.

How I ever got through the half-hour that intervened between the time that the ladies left the dining-room until the gentlemen came upstairs into the drawing-room, I do not rightly remember.

I know that I was monopolised by an old lady in the back drawing-room, who was most anxious for information upon the correct manner of tracing the School-of-Art patterns upon dark cloth. She was a very garrulous person, and her questions were interminable; I know also that I had an idea of identifying Mrs Warner, and of entering into conversation with that lady. But when at last I succeeded in making her out to be the bony, sour-visaged matron who had been denouncing the bishops at dinner-time, and whom I had set down as the clergyman's wife, she was too much engaged in conversation with Mrs Hardcastle for me to be able to interrupt her without rudeness; and before an opportunity came for addressing her, the gentlemen entered.

All this time I was feeling sick with apprehension and suspense. At whatever cost I was de-

terminated to know the truth, and to find out whether it was indeed true that Frank, my lover, was in the society of Helen Marsden. If so, they were guilty of the basest treachery towards me; for what motive could they have for concealing the fact from me that was not full of deceit and falseness? A thousand intangible suspicions that had floated vaguely through my mind at different times, returned to my memory now, full of a new significance.

Why had Helen gone abroad so suddenly and so needlessly? Was it altogether on account of her health, or was that only the ostensible reason, and was a deep-laid scheme between her parents and Frank's, for throwing them in each other's society, at the bottom of it? Why, again, had Helen so urgently entreated me not to write about Frank, and why had she only written to me one short letter from Paris a few days after her departure? And, above all, if Frank's plans had so utterly changed, if, as it appeared, he had left the "Antigone," and was merely travelling about with his cousin and her parents, why, oh! why, had he not at least written to me to inform me of this most important alteration in his life?

Of course, now I saw why my letters had never reached him. They had gone on - a wild-goose

chase after H.M.S. "Antigone" half across the world; whereas Frank himself, faithless and forgetful, was spending his time in Italy. A storm of indignation rose in my heart against him as I thought of it. I said to myself that all men were hateful, and heartless, and false; and then I raised my eyes, and met those of Stephen Hardcastle fixed upon me with a look of tender solicitude, as if to say, "What ails you?" A warm gush of gratitude filled my heart suddenly towards him. Here, at least, was one man who had never altered to me, who was always devoted, and always true! I felt drawn by many degrees nearer to him by this dreadful discovery concerning Frank. Stephen Hardcastle was always the same to me. I was not in love with him, but I believed in him. And, after all, what is first love but a delusion? Is not the trust and confidence that I felt for him far better? And, for the first time, I said to myself that a young man's love is mere passion, but that the love of a man who has reached middle life is purer, and better, and more lasting, and ten times more worth possessing.

I arose from my seat, and leaving the old lady of the inquisitive turn of mind concerning crewel-work to the tender mercies of Mr Harford, who was bearing down upon us with an evident intention, which I thought I could see plainly depicted

on his countenance, of plunging once more into "Inorganic Matter" with the first victim whom he could succeed in entrapping, I made the best of my way into the front room, and crept somewhat timidly up to Mr Hardcastle's side as he stood talking politics to Mr Warner.

They ceased speaking as I reached them, and made way for me to join them. I felt desperate for more information, and plunged boldly into the subject in my mind.

"As we left the dining-room, you spoke of a great friend of mine, Helen Marsden," I said to Mr Warner. "Pray tell me something about her."

Mr Warner laughed, and turning to Mr Hardcastle said, banteringly,—

"Here is a young lady who takes the deepest interest in my son Frank."

Although I was not looking at him, I was instantly conscious of the sudden start with which Mr Hardcastle straightened himself into keenest attention.

I coloured angrily and indignantly; but before I could speak he had answered for me.

"I believe that it is a lady after whom Miss Orchester has just inquired. Perhaps you will be able to give her the information she has asked you for," he said coldly; and once more I felt grateful to him.

"Certainly," answered Mr Warner, with an instant change of manner. "My niece Helen is quite well, and is at present with her parents at Palermo. 'Hotel di Roma' is her address, should you wish to write to her."

"Thank you! I daresay I may do so. And is Mr Frank Warner with them?"

"Yes, he is."

"And when are they—is Helen, I mean, coming home?"

"I believe the whole party are to move on to Rome in the course of the next fortnight."

These questions and answers passed between us with the utmost gravity and politeness. Mr Warner no longer attempted to sneer at me for my interest in his son.

Mr Harcastle stood beside me, and heard every word that we said. I thought that I had spoken with wonderful self-possession and tranquillity, but my hands trembled as they played nervously with my fan, and I think I must have been very pale.

"Come and sing us one of your pretty little songs, Maggie," he said softly to me, and drew me away to the piano.

He hardly ever called me by my name, and I was so much agitated that I scarcely noticed he did so now. He opened the piano, and placed my

music-book upon it, and found the song that I was to sing, taking a long time about it, and turning the leaves over and over before he settled the place for me. It was as though he wished to give me time to recover my self-control.

I stood by the piano with my back to the room, so that nobody could see me, and I fumbled nervously at my gloves, trying to get them off. It was all true then, and my lover was untrue to me, and I—I was forsaken! Oh! what was to become of me?

I raised my eyes with a look of piteous entreaty to Mr Hardcastle's face. It was like a child's appeal to be saved from the pain it suffers. I did not remember for the moment that Mr Hardcastle was my lover too,—that Frank's defection was his triumph. I only knew that he was good to me, and that I was in suffering, and that he would help me. I was getting so used to turn to him. And when I looked at him there came an expression into his face that even at the time filled me with a vague bewilderment. He turned very white, and then as suddenly flushed crimson. He seemed about to speak, then checked himself with an effort, looking away from me as he did so, as though he could not bear to meet my eyes.

I could not understand it. Only one thing was clear to me, and that was that he knew that Frank Warner was the man who was his rival.

I sang my song—I do not think the performance could have been a very creditable one—and then another lady played a long sonata of Beethoven's, and I stood by the piano and turned over the pages of her music for her, and directly afterwards the company began to depart.

All the time Mr Hardcastle stood by the piano so as to prevent my going back again into the room. I knew that he wished to prevent my speaking to Mr Warner again. It was good of him, I thought, to be so anxious to save me from pain. It was like him to be so full of consideration and thoughtful tact.

When the Warners were safely gone away, he left the piano, and devoted himself to taking the departing ladies to their carriages.

Very soon the room was quite empty, and only Mrs Hardcastle and myself were left among the wax candles and the hot-house plants that had beautified the room for the occasion.

"Well, my dear, I hope you enjoyed yourself," said my kind old hostess; "and don't you think it all went off very well?"

"It went off beautifully," I answered, ignoring the first part of her remark. "The dinner was the best I ever ate."

"I am very glad you thought so. Well, now, I suppose you are ready for bed?"

"Not a bit of it, mother," said her son, coming back into the room at this minute. "You shall not be kept from your well-earned slumbers; but I am going to make this young lady sit up for ten minutes to sing that song over again to me. Do you know, Miss Orchester, that you sang it atrociously?"

"Oh! Stephen, my dear! how can you say such a thing! I am sure she sang charmingly, and looked so lovely too!"

I was getting quite used to being called lovely now, and had learnt to understand that Fred's opinion of my looks had not been worth much, so I only laughed at the old lady's outspoken flattery.

"As to the looks, mother," said her son, "there I grant you are right; but the song, I maintain, was a failure; get it out, Miss Maggie, and we will go over it again."

"Well, I will leave you to fight out your battles together," said that naughty old woman, feigning not to see my looks of piteous entreaty, for of course she was in the conspiracy against me; she kissed me and wished me good-night, and left me alone with her son.

I had moved to the piano, and had gone through the farce of taking out the song. But of course I knew that there was to be no music spoken of between us.

Mr Hardcastle came up to me and took my hand.

"It is Mr Warner's son?" he said, in a low voice.

I bowed my head in assent.

"Tell me about it, Maggie?" he asked gently.

"What has happened to-night?"

"Oh, nothing new, I suppose," I said wearily. "I found out at dinner that—that Frank was his son; he had gone away for three years; he is in the navy."

"In the navy?" repeated Stephen slowly.

"Yes," I said, not noticing the odd way in which he looked at me; "at least he was, for apparently he has left it, and he has never written to me—never once, and he is with Helen now. Oh! what shall I do—what shall I do?" and I flung myself across the piano, against which I leant, and burst into tears.

He left my side and began pacing up and down the room. How should I know, whilst I was sobbing over my absent lover, that there was a fierce conflict going on in this man's soul who was now beside me? How should I guess, whilst I was so taken up with my own angry and mortified feelings, that this man, whose sensations I regarded so little that I did not even give them a thought, was going through a desperate struggle with temptation,—that right and wrong, truth and dishonesty, were waging a wild warfare within him? I never guessed it, never knew it, not till long after.

I was on curious terms with this man who was my lover, and yet whose love, because it was kept away out of my sight, made so little impression upon me that I hardly ever realised its presence. I thought of him so much more as a kind and sympathising friend who was always ready to help me and to advise me. It seemed to me in my young selfishness that he was to be always there, full of devotion and generosity,—that he was to give me all, and I was never to give him back anything. He was so ready to work for his reward, that I forgot that the day would ever come when he would claim it.

So I wept on in my blindness, and Stephen Hardcastle paced up and down the room, and fought out his battle, was tempted, and fell; and I knew it not.

Suddenly I turned to him, wringing my hands together in my misery.

"Tell me!" I cried despairingly, "*are you sure* it is true? Is there no horrible deception about it? Are you quite sure that Frank Warner is that man's son?"

A moment's pause.

"*Quite,*" he answered, and he was white with an ashy pallor down to his lips,—"*I am quite sure that Frank Warner is his son.*"

I turned away with a low moan.

"Why do you waste your tears upon him?" he

exclaimed suddenly, with an outburst of irritation. "Is he not too contemptible to regret, false and fickle as he has proved himself to be? Is he worthy of such sorrow?"

"No, he is not worthy!" I answered indignantly, raising my head, and dashing away my tears. "You are right; I will waste no more tears and no more thoughts upon him. I will try, indeed I will try, to cast him out of my mind for ever; only have patience with me, you who are so true and so good to me."

I put up my hands as though to lay them upon his arm, but he turned sharply away from me, so that I could not see his face. I fancied he was angry with me. In what had I so suddenly vexed him, I wondered.

But whilst I stood looking at him timidly and irresolutely, wondering what I should say to him more, he turned all at once and took me impetuously in his arms.

"My love!—my darling!" he cried, with a wild outburst of passion that absolutely terrified me, straining me tightly to his heart, although he did not attempt to kiss me. "What is there I would not do to make you my own? What madness would I not be guilty of? What depth of degradation would I not wade through so that at last I might reach you?"

And then he thrust me from him, poor, frightened child that I was! trembling and shrinking away out of his grasp, and, as though unable to trust himself to speak another word, left me alone, and five minutes later the slam of the street door told me that he was gone.

And all the time he knew—he knew, and he never told me!

CHAPTER XI.

HOW I RECEIVE A LETTER.

“Was thy dream, then, a shadowy lie?”—*Hooper*.

“WHAT a sad thing that was about the poor men who were massacred by those dreadful savages in the West Indies,” said Mrs Hardcastle to me a few mornings later, as she unfolded the sheets of the *Times* at breakfast time, and settled her gold-rimmed spectacles on her nose; “and here, I see, is another paragraph about them.”

“What was that, Mrs Hardcastle?” I inquired, without evincing quite as much interest in so melancholy a subject as humanity and philanthropy demanded. For when a catastrophe occurs to anybody you never heard of before, at the other side of the world, you are not generally powerfully affected thereby. You

exclaim, "How shocking!" and five minutes after you probably forget what there was to be shocked at. I was much occupied at that minute in endeavouring to blow out the spirit-lamp under the silver kettle on the breakfast-table, and my breath being all required in that direction, I did not waste more of it than civility demanded, upon the fate of the unfortunates who were massacred by the savages.

"Did you not see it?" continued Mrs Hardcastle. "Dear me, I wonder at that; it was in all the papers about two months ago: a boat-load of sailors who imprudently landed on one of the small, unexplored coral islands—man-of-war's-men they were—dear me, what was her name?—the 'Antimony,' oh, no, the 'Antigone' was the name."

"*What!*" I cried, and the spoon with which I had been just extinguishing the spirit-lamp dropped with a clatter out of my fingers on to the ground.

Mrs Hardcastle started.

"Dear me, Maggie, how you made me jump."

"Pray tell me at once what it was?" I interrupted agitatedly. "Who were they? What were their names? Were they killed? I—I knew somebody once on the 'Antigone.' Of course, he was not there himself," I said to myself, instantly quieting the terror which had sprung unreasoningly into my heart. Of course

he was not there—was he not in Italy, safe with Helen Marsden? Yes, quite safe—thank God at least for that. But the mere fact of its being his old shipmates to whom this tragedy had happened, seemed to bring it home to my understanding with awful distinctness.

“Pray tell me about it?” I asked again, more tranquilly, subduing my excitement with an effort. “It might have been my friend,” I added, in a lower voice.

“Oh no, my dear, I don’t think it would be anybody you know; they were all common sailors, I think. It makes it so much less dreadful,” said the good lady naïvely, “when there are no gentlemen killed; at least, of course, it is just as bad for them, poor things; but it doesn’t shock one so much. Oh no, they were all common sailors, poor fellows! Oh! I think there was one officer though. I forget his name now, though I remember at the time I noticed it, because it was the name of somebody else I knew. Let me see, what was it?”

“Oh! it could not have been my—my friend, because I remember now that he was not with the ship, so it was not him. But please tell me what happened.”

“Why, it seems they went on shore on one of these dreadful islands, thinking that it was uninhabited, and as they did not return, their com-

panions went the next day in search of them ; and they only found traces of a large fire, and numberless footsteps of men, and all sorts of dreadful remains of their poor comrades' clothes and weapons, and even portions of their bodies. Yes, my dear, it is horrible ; it makes one shudder, does it not ? and all they could see of the wretches who had murdered the poor fellows were a few canoes full of blacks, disappearing across the sea the other side, towards a neighbouring island, a few miles off. It is supposed that they were cannibals."

"How dreadful !" I exclaimed, turning sick and cold at the horrible recital. "But did you not say there was more about it to-day ?"

"Yes, and so there is," said the good lady, re-adjusting her spectacles on her nose, and turning over the pages of the paper. "Let me see, where was it ? Ah ! here it is, only a short paragraph : 'A report has reached Jamaica, through some natives, that two white men are being detained as captives by one of the cannibal tribes ; there is, of course, no proof of this beyond the word of these men ; but if it should be the case, they might, possibly, be the survivors of the ill-starred boat's crew of the "Antigone," who perished so miserably a few months ago while cruising among the coral islands. This, of course, is but a conjecture ; but it has aroused a considerable amount of interest

among the English residents ; it is probable that some effort will be made to investigate the fate of these unfortunate men.' Dear, dear, how dreadful to be kept a prisoner by cannibals ! I suppose they only keep them to fatten them : they can have no other motive ! My dear Maggie, give me my tea, and let us try and forget this gloomy topic. What dreadful things seem to be allowed in the world to be sure ! How very, very badly cook has made this egg omelette ! I must really give her a good talking to about her breakfasts."

And Mrs Hardcastle sighed deeply, whether over the egg omelette or over the sailors who were being fattened for the consumption of the cannibals, did not very plainly appear.

This conversation, beyond exciting a little natural horror and pity in my mind, and a fervent thanksgiving that Frank Warner, at all events, was safely removed from the many and various dangers of the deep, and was far away from any thing so horrible as savages and cannibals, very soon passed away out of my memory, as so many others do, and I remembered it no more.

I was far more taken up with wondering when Mr Hardcastle was coming to see us again, for since the night of the dinner-party he had not appeared in Harley Street. I wondered how he would behave to me after that strange outburst

of passion, which, whilst it had frightened me, had fascinated me too by its suddenness and its unexpectedness. It had been like a fresh revelation to me to find how deeply he loved me; and that there was an oddness and a peculiarity about his method of expressing his love only struck me as natural in a person who was certainly, whatever might be his failing, not guilty of being commonplace.

I liked to think that this man, who was so grave and so clever, whose opinion in society was so much sought and respected, should nevertheless lose his self-control and his sobriety over a girl like myself—young enough to be his daughter. There is an intense flattery about such a position which no doubt is keenly attractive to many young women. Else why do so many girls in their teens marry middle-aged men with whom they have fallen sincerely and thoroughly in love.

Not that I was in love with Mr Hardcastle, but the knowledge of his affection was becoming infinitely precious to me. My young lover had treated me so badly; my old lover treated me so well. I was not one of those consistently strong-willed young women who, having wasted their young affections upon an unworthy object, continue to worship him with unwavering persistence unto their dying day. I was simply an ordinary

English girl, affectionate and impressionable. Frank Warner was the first man who had asked for my love. He was young and pleasant, and fascinating in manner. I had given him my heart quite simply and easily, and I had been quite prepared to have loved him to the end of the chapter, had all gone smoothly and happily. But apparently he had changed his mind! he had neglected me and consoled himself elsewhere. I had made myself very miserable for a time, but now I was quite tired of being miserable. I was not prepared to wear the willow interminably for Frank or for any other recalcitrant lover. I said to myself that I would forget him speedily, and take that happiness which lay so close to me that I had only to put out my hand to grasp it—the happiness which would consist in being petted and spoilt, and indulged to my heart's content by a man who was absolutely devoted to me. And if at the bottom of my heart something which would not be completely stifled, told me that I had given to my first love the best and the truest part of me, that I should never again feel for any man quite what I had done for Frank Warner,—if such thoughts did now and then come across me, I put them on one side with an effort, determined not to listen or to heed.

“Nobody ever marries their first fancy,” I

would say to myself, "and most people would be very sorry indeed if they had. That first glamour of love can bring one nothing but disappointment; it is well to get it over, and have done with it. *Falling* into love is folly, but to walk into it with one's eyes well open, and one's senses well kept in hand, that is what is far wiser and more prudent."

So it was that when Mrs Hardcastle wondered gently why "Steevie" did not come to see us, and asked me smilingly, but with a sharp glance, too, from her dark eyes, whether I had not been very cruel and unkind to him that he did not come as usual, that as I shook my head at the accusation, I blushed shamefacedly and guiltily as I did so, feeling sorry that the old lady should see my confusion, but secretly wishing that he would come quite as much as she did.

But before I saw him again I received a letter which, when I saw the handwriting and the foreign stamps upon the envelope, made my heart beat wildly and painfully. It was from Helen Marsden. I tore it open with trembling hands and read as follows:—

"DEAREST MAGGIE,—I feel quite ashamed of never having written to you; but I daresay you will have guessed why I shrank from writing

more about your affairs. I *did*, you know, write to you from Genoa, telling you all; but I have a sort of idea you never could have received my letter, unless, indeed, you were too upset by it to answer it. But I very foolishly gave it to the waiter at the hotel to post just as we were leaving, and perhaps he forgot all about it. I do hope, dear, that you have got over it now a little, and that you won't be angry with me, and think me very heartless for talking about myself and my own happiness. I hear you met Uncle Hervey at a dinner-party. Did he tell you that we are to be married next week? But no, I don't think it was settled then. I could not make up my mind to be married so soon after. Well, I will not harrow your heart, poor dear, by speaking of it. But now I see it is no advantage to anybody to put it off, and would do you no good, so have consented to be married at once. Uncle Hervey says you asked a great many questions about us both, and especially about Frank (but I couldn't make out all he wrote, because he does write so detestably, I never *can* read the long words). I am sure when you see *my* Frank, you will forgive him for marrying me. Dear me! how very different I did once think everything would be! But it doesn't do to look back. And now, darling, good-bye. Do *write* me a line to

wish me happiness. You are so unselfish, I am sure you will. We are to be married *very* quietly, which I am sure you will be glad of, at the English Chapel — no bridesmaids, or breakfast, or anything. It is to be on the twenty-first, so think of us. I daresay we shall travel about for some months before we come home; but nothing is settled yet.—Your very affectionate

“HELEN MARSDEN.”

I read this letter very carefully through two or three times, and when I had done so, I came to the conclusion that a more studiously and deliberately insulting letter could not have been penned. Childishly expressed and incoherently worded as it was, it was nevertheless written with an intent. It was an apology to me for taking my lover away; but an apology that was ten thousand times worse than absolute silence upon a topic which every dictate of right feeling and good taste should have forbidden her to have touched upon.

In her letter from Genoa, which I had never received, the Italian waiter having, I suppose, pocketed it and his tip together, she had presumably paved the way for the shock that was to follow—“told me all,” as she had expressed it. But how *dared* she “hope that I had got over it?”—tell me that I should be “angry” with her for

writing of her own happiness, and that I should "forgive *her* Frank when I saw him!" *Her* Frank indeed! Well, she was welcome to him, poor, mean-spirited, contemptible sneak! I wish her joy of her possession. And what did it signify to *me* that her wedding was to be a quiet one? She was welcome to ask five hundred people to it, for aught I cared. And what did she mean by not "harrowing my heart?" And I was very, very angry indeed with Helen Marsden. I sat down to answer her by return of post, with a thunder-cloud upon my brow, and rage and indignation in my soul.

"DEAR HELEN,—Of course I wish you joy with all my heart. There is no earthly reason why your wedding should not be as gay and as brilliant as you can desire. I am quite the last person to wish it otherwise. I need not wait till I see *your* Frank or you either to 'forgive' you, as you say; but I did not know there was anything to forgive. I hope you will both be very happy. Pray tell him so, with my best wishes.—Yours affectionately,

"MAGGIE ORCHESTER."

I flattered myself that I had written this note very cleverly. It was short, and not enthusiastic; and yet it was utterly free from the slightest indication of pique or resentment. It was perfectly friendly and pleasant, and yet at the same time it

was not in the least intimate or over-affectionate in its terms. No one could take offence at it, and yet no one could fail to see that I no longer took the faintest interest in either the bride or the bridegroom.

"Mr Hardcastle," announced the footman behind me as I finished the *chef d'œuvre*.

I jumped up hurriedly. I was alone in the drawing-room, Mrs Hardcastle having gone upstairs to put on her bonnet. I was so excited by my correspondence, that I utterly forgot that I had not seen him since the evening he had caressed me so strangely and so unexpectedly.

Before he had time to speak, I went towards him and placed Helen's letter in his hands and my answer to it.

"Please read these," I said; "it is a letter from Helen Marsden, announcing her marriage to—to Mr Frank Warner." I pronounced the name firmly and unwaveringly. "I don't want to have any secrets from you. Read what she says and what I have written, and tell me if I have done right."

He went to the window, and read them through attentively, both of them.

"You have done perfectly right," he answered, in a low voice, folding them up and giving them back to me; and he did not look at me as he spoke.

I took my own note and put it into an envelope, addressed it, stamped it, and fastened it up.

"There," I said, turning to him lightly, "that is settled then, and done for—once and for ever. Now say, 'How do you do?' to me, Mr Hardcastle; your mother has been thinking of advertising for you in the 'lost' column. Ah! here she comes. Now I must go and dress, or I shall keep the carriage waiting."

And all the time Stephen Hardcastle held the key of that letter in his own possession; he knew what was the truth of it all, and yet he never spoke!

CHAPTER XII.

HOW FRED COMES HOME.

"A sorry jest."

I WONDER what are the sensations of most women on the eve of their wedding-day? and what is the correct and conventional mode of thought that young ladies of a well-regulated turn of mind should be careful to cultivate upon so momentous an occasion? Ought you to be happy and high-spirited, or downcast and depressed? Should you wear your joy boldly upon your face, or hide it discreetly beneath a mantle of maidenly modesty and reserve? I am unable to answer these questions. My own feelings upon the eventful day in question were so varied and so peculiar, that I may venture

to state that they have at all events the merit of originality. I will endeavour to describe them accurately.

I awoke very early in the morning in my own little bedroom at Follerton. When I say very early, I mean that it was long before there was any occasion for me to get up; but it was lighter than usual, because the ground was covered with snow, and the glare came in dazzlingly through my windows, even in the grey light of the winter morning. My earliest waking thoughts were devoted—not as they should by every law of romance and poetry have been, to the contemplation of the beauties of character of the man whom I was to marry on the morrow, but to matters solely culinary.

Had the carrier brought that ham last night from Rivertown? Would the confectioner send in the cakes in time? Would Mrs Butt “get on” with the grand gentleman from Gunter’s who was coming down to-day from London to cook the breakfast, or would they fall out by the way and “spoil the broth,” according to the ancient adage concerning a plurality of cooks? *Mem.* to borrow three stewpans and four jelly-moulds from the Rectory, and to send over for them quite early after breakfast. These knotty points being settled, I turned myself round in my bed and drew up the

clothes to my chin. I then reflected that Fred would be home before lunch, and that I had not seen him since my engagement was an accomplished fact—indeed, I had not seen him at all since his Oxford experiences, for he had been paying visits about the country since what I irreverently termed “his holidays” had begun. I felt very glad that I should have him to myself to-day quietly, and I wondered what he thought about it all—about my marriage and Helen’s, for Helen was married by this time. I had written to Fred about these events, but he was not given to correspondence, and had not answered my letters. Decidedly a long talk with Fred would be nice. Then I recollected that I had forgotten to put out the sheets for his room to be aired last night; then I believe I dozed a little. Afterwards I awoke and shed a few tears, because I was so soon to leave dear old Follerton. But the housemaid coming in with my hot water at this juncture, I restrained this outburst of sentiment, in order to ascertain whether she had mended the silk lining to the flap of papa’s best coat. Having satisfied myself upon this point, I arose and dressed myself and went down to breakfast.

Papa, who was opening his letters as I entered the breakfast-room, took the unusual step of coming to meet me, and of embracing me with

effusion, blessing me as he did so, with a sensational tremble in his voice which would have brought down the applause of the gallery had we been actors in a serio-comedy. For an instant I rather wondered whether anything had happened to him to draw forth this exhibition of his sacred feelings; but that must have been my ignorance, because, of course, if there are orthodox rules of behaviour for a bride, there must be a corresponding set of directions for the bride's father. Why doesn't somebody write a "handy book" upon this important subject? then we should all know what was expected of us. Papa, at all events, was evidently determined that nothing should be wanting to make *his* part a success. What an odd thing it was that I could not get it out of my mind that it was all a play, in which each of us had a part to perform! Only I could not recollect my "cues" properly.

I ate a very good breakfast. I was most unromantically hungry. My father ate next to nothing and sighed as he looked across the table at us.

"My dearest child, it makes me very sad to think how soon I must part from you."

"Does it, papa? I thought you were glad that I am going to marry Mr Hardcastle."

"Of course, my dear—of course I resign you to

him gladly; he will make my little girl happy—he will be a good husband; but a father's feelings Maggie!"

And then I broke down entirely in my part. I did what surely no properly-trained bride of well-regulated emotions was ever known to do—I laughed, quite hardly and bitterly, and I looked up across the table defiantly at my affectionate parent.

"It is quite a love-match, isn't it, papa?"

And it was quite, I suppose, within the correct order of proceedings that my father appeared to be genuinely shocked at me.

"My dear—really—I am sure I do hope you love your future husband. It would grieve me very much if you did not. Of course I do not forget that you have most dutifully, and I may even say, my dear, most generously, given in to my wishes—my suggestions, I should say. Of course I shall never forget it; and it should be a cause of deep thankfulness to yourself that you have been enabled to be of such inestimable service to your father and your brother! but still, my dear, on such an occasion as this—your last day at home—would it not be as well to—ahem!—to sink this view of the subject, as it were—to forget all that might sound to a stranger, only to a stranger, mind, to be a little mercenary in this marriage,

and to remember only the—the bright points as it were?”

“Oh yes!” I interrupted quickly; “let us, as you say, forget everything that ought not to be remembered. You are quite right, papa; of course I am marrying Mr Hardcastle because—because—oh, for any reason you like save the real one!” And I rose from the table and fled out of the room, bursting into foolish, unreasonable tears outside in the hall.

If I had spoken the truth, I should have said, “I am marrying Mr Hardcastle because my lover was false to me, and because I am so miserable over it that I might as well marry him as anybody else, and because he is very good to me, and very fond of me;” but it is best probably, as papa had said, to sink truth on the eve of one’s wedding-day, and to remember nothing but what is proper and conventional. We English people are all of us supposed to marry for love. As a matter-of-fact we marry for fifty thousand other causes that have nothing to do with it; but woe to the rash couple who are indiscreet enough to own their infidelity to the national tradition!

Well, after all, I suppose I had not very much to complain of: my lover was rich, and handsome, and devoted, and by marrying him I was freeing my father from an intolerable burden of debt and

anxiety, and enabling my only brother to pursue the career he was destined for. And for these good and pleasant results I sacrificed nothing—neither truth, nor constancy, nor happiness: for was it not Frank who had been faithless to me?

So I dried my futile tears, and went into the kitchen to talk to Mrs Butt; and very soon after my brother arrived, and I ran excitedly out to meet him.

“Oh! darling Fred,” I cried, flinging my arms joyfully round his neck, “how glad I am you came so early!”

“There, that will do—don’t throttle me!” replied my brother, divesting himself gently of my encircling arms, and beginning to unwind his woollen comforter from about his throat. “How cold it is! People ought not to be expected to travel this weather. How is the gov’nor?—flourishing, I suppose?”

The very way in which Fred spoke these few words, stretching his cheek out condescendingly to me to kiss as he spoke, seemed to chill all my sisterly enthusiasm. Fred was altered. He was no longer the old playfellow of my childhood; he was a grand young gentleman with a budding moustache and a careless air of *nonchalant* manhood, who thought himself too grand to be hugged by his sister under the eyes of the flyman who was taking in his portmanteau, and the housemaid who

had opened the door to him. I stood by him disappointed and snubbed, whilst he gave directions about his things, and welcomed papa, who came out of his study to see him, with a careless greeting; then he turned, not unkindly, to me again.

"Well, little Madge, I suppose your head is completely turned with the grandeur of this swell match of yours."

"Oh! Fred," I said, "I am longing to talk to you. Won't you come upstairs?"

We went up into the old playroom together, Fred shivering and remonstrating against the cold all the way upstairs; but he submitted with a pretty good grace to sit down on the dilapidated old sofa, where I drew him down by my side.

"Now then, what is it, Maggie? Make haste, for it's awfully cold up here."

"Oh! Fred, I must talk to you about—about Helen's wedding; just once more, for the last time. I will never speak of it again. Why did you never write to me about it?"

Fred's brow grew overcast.

"There was nothing to write about," he answered, shifting himself uneasily about on the sofa. "Helen is a little flirt. Why, she has promised to marry me ever since she was fifteen!"

I opened my eyes.

"*Really?*" I said, in astonishment. "And were

you fond of her, Fred? And is that why you could not bear to write about it? Oh! poor, poor Fred!"

"There, there, don't make a fuss about it! I have not broken my heart about it, you see!"

"How odd it was of her to marry *Frank*!" I said, below my voice. "Oh! Fred, have you ever understood it?"

He looked at me strangely. I sat close to him, holding his hand caressingly between mine. He drew it suddenly and roughly away.

"How should I know anything about it?" he exclaimed, almost, as it seemed to me, with anger. "I suppose he wanted her money. She is an only child, and she must have at least twenty thousand pounds some day."

I drew back from him disgusted. My brother, it seemed, had made his own calculations about Helen's fortune.

"Oh! not *that*!" I said; "Frank would never have thought of her money. But, oh! Fred, are you quite sure that he never wrote to me one single line? Did he never send *you* a letter or a message for me? Are you quite—quite sure?"

To my utter amazement Fred started suddenly from my side, and began pacing up and down the room.

"What can you possibly mean?" he exclaimed, stopping short in front of me.

"Dear Fred, don't be angry!" I said soothingly, and utterly bewildered by his manner. "What is there to make you angry? It would not have been very wonderful, would it, if he *had* written, seeing that we were once engaged? And there would have been nothing strange, would there, in his sending such a letter to you for me?"

"And—and—you imagine that *I* should have troubled myself to keep back your letter!" he exclaimed furiously, and with such an unaccountable tumult of passion and confusion that I simply sat and stared at him speechlessly.

Had he gone out of his senses? I said to myself. Oh! my brother was altered indeed!

"*Fred!*" I exclaimed, at last, reproachfully; "as if I should think such a dreadful thing of you! You must be mad!"

And then his whole manner suddenly altered. He laughed nervously.

"Pooh!" he said, and stooped down and kissed me. "Come along downstairs and get me some lunch, you little goose! Of course I was only joking!"

We went downstairs. But of all the extraordinary methods of perpetrating a joke that I ever heard of in the whole course of my life, the above-mentioned "joke" of my brother's struck me as the most remarkable.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW I UNPACK FRED'S PORTMANTEAU.

"There needs no ghost, to tell us this."

Hamlet.

IN the afternoon Mr Hardcastle and his mother arrived at the hotel in Rivertown. The old lady was very thoughtful and considerate, and would not come to stay with us at Follerton. She knew we were not rich, and that it was difficult for us to make guests really comfortable in our poorly-furnished old house; so she refused my invitation, and decided upon taking rooms at the hotel, so that, as she put it, she might have her Steevie with her to the last.

The weather was so cold that she did not even come over to see us that afternoon, preferring to reserve her strength for the wedding the next day; but Stephen walked over through the snow, and came in soon after luncheon.

I had hardly seen him since we had been formally engaged; for, in the end, Mr Hardcastle had urged me to marry him by letter. As soon as my visit to his mother had come to an end, he had written to me very simply—almost formally—and asked me if I would not give him a favourable answer; and when I had done so, he came down once to see me—only once—and he kissed me then for

the first time, and asked me if I would mind being married soon. I minded nothing. I let myself be kissed, feeling grateful to him that he only did so once, and ashamed, at the same time, in my heart, of such a reason for gratitude; and I consented to everything that he wished. And that was how our wedding-day came to be fixed for the 10th of January.

Since then Mr Hardcastle had been unable to come and see me. He had been very busy apparently. He had, of course, written to me frequently; but his letters, though affectionate and pleasant, were to a certain extent business-like. They were unlike his real self; they skimmed upon surface matters, and they missed those rare flashes of sudden fire and feeling which had made me at times almost—not quite—in love with him.

When he came to-day there was a certain reticence about him—which, I said to myself, with a grim amusement, was probably the correct attitude for a bridegroom-elect to assume. We had no time alone together. Fred came whistling in and out of the room, apologising elaborately every time he did so, to my infinite annoyance. Just as if, I said to myself hotly, Mr Hardcastle and I were likely to be billing and cooing like a couple of lack-a-daisical young lovers! Then my father had a hundred questions to ask, and was fussing about all over the house, calling Mr Hardcastle

away from me every minute. And then there were the settlements to be looked over.

By that time two young cousins, who were to stay in the house and be my bridesmaids, arrived, and I was obliged to go and receive and entertain them. Upon their arrival Mr Hardcastle took his leave.

After he had gone, and when the two Miss Westons had retired into their room, with the desirable object of trying on their bridesmaids' dresses, my father called me into his study.

"My dear child, Mr Hardcastle has been most liberal to you!" he exclaimed, kissing me.

"What do you mean, papa?"

"He has settled forty thousand pounds upon you!"

"I am exceedingly sorry to hear it!" I exclaimed. "Papa! how could you let him do it? We are regularly robbing him between us!"

"Maggie, I am surprised at you! It is only most natural on his part!"

"You are a little fool!" said Fred contemptuously. "What is the use of your going into heroics? For goodness' sake, take what the man gives you and say nothing about it! He is rich enough, in all conscience!"

I went away saddened and disgusted; there was such a dreadful lack of refinement and right feel-

ing about them both. The only difference that I could see between them was that my father's love of greed was cloaked and veiled by pretty, polite sentences; whereas Fred's thoughts were expressed coarsely and strongly, just as they came into his mind.

I was unfeignedly sorry that Mr Hardcastle had settled so large a sum upon me. If I had loved him I should not have cared; but it seemed to me that he was giving me everything, whereas I—I had nothing to give him; not even my heart!

I wandered listlessly upstairs by myself. There was a strong, rich smell of cooking from the back regions. The servants were all up to their very eyes in preparations; for, although the wedding party was to be a very small one, it was a great event for our slender establishment. I could hear the sound of the servants' voices, loud and shrill, up the back staircase, and the lower chatter of my two cousins over their finery in their bedroom.

I stood by the window at the top of the staircase and looked out over the dear old park, wrapped in its sheet of dazzling snow, with the great tree trunks standing up, black and gaunt, out of it. I felt glad it was thus that I was leaving it—in its winter sorrow, and not in all its summer bravery that I loved so dearly. It was better so, and yet it

was very sad; and oh! what a dreary time of the year for a wedding!

Presently it began to snow again, first in great big, soft flakes, that came wide apart through the silent air, floating softly and gently to the earth; then, by degrees, faster and denser, till at last a thick, white cloud seemed to gather over the face of the earth, and the trees, and the palings, and the lodge-gates beyond, all became blotted out, and the wind rose suddenly and drove the snow along the surface of the ground.

I shivered and turned away from the window. Oh! how dreary it was!

Fred's room was close by, and his door was wide open. I turned idly into it. His portmanteau stood untouched in the middle of the floor: nobody had been up to unpack it. For the sake of something to do, and because I remembered how busy they all were down stairs, I began to unpack it myself. It was not the first time I had put my brother's clothes away, but, alas! it was likely to be the last!

I turned out all his garments—shirts and coats and socks and ties—and put them all away for him; then a varied collection of boots; then jewellery, pins and studs, which I had never seen before; then finally a heterogeneous collection of books and papers—Greek and Hebrew tomes;

French novels and German philosophy, huddled indiscriminately together; and then whole bundles of letters, and bills all loose and unsorted, which I gathered up in handfuls, not knowing what else to do with them, and which I deposited on the top of the chest of drawers. As I did so, one dropped out of my hands. I stooped to pick it up. It was an empty envelope half torn across, and I was just about to toss it from me into the fireplace, when suddenly my eye fell upon the handwriting.

A cry burst from me; my heart beat violently, and then stood still as though paralysed within me.

For the handwriting was Frank Warner's!

For some minutes I trembled so violently that I could not clearly distinguish what was written upon it. But presently I was able to see exactly what it was that I held. The envelope was of thinnish paper, not quite what we call foreign paper, but of a thinner texture than that used commonly in England. The stamps were torn off and so was the postmark. It was addressed thus:—

*Frederick Orchest
Follerton Court
Rivert*

The final letters of the words being torn off, a pen had been run through the two lower lines,

and in my father's handwriting, "University Coll., Oxford," had been written at one side. On the reverse side, under the flap of the envelope, was written, "Please give enclo" the remainder being also torn off, and outside was the Oxford postmark, with the date of the arrival of the letter there. And the date was *December 20th*, that is to say, *three weeks ago!*

It was Frank Warner's handwriting. I was perfectly certain of it. It is true I had received but one letter from him—the letter that had announced his departure—and unfortunately, when I became engaged to Stephen Hardcastle, I had thought it right to tear that up. But does a woman ever forget the handwriting of the man she loves? Every word of that one letter had been so read and re-read, so wept and so prayed over, that it had been burnt into my memory for ever. If I had never seen another line of his writing for twenty years, I should have known it again anywhere. I said to myself that I could have sworn to it amongst a thousand others.

What did it mean then? I passed my hand wearily over my aching forehead—the bewilderment of it was almost too much for me. I looked again at the date—December 20th. And he had been married to Helen on the 21st. Then he had written to Fred, and there was an enclosure for me.

He had written just before his wedding, and Fred had kept the letter from me.

Pale and trembling, but resolute and angry, I took the tell-tale envelope in my hands and went downstairs.

Fred was coming out of papa's room. The afternoon was closing in; it was getting dusk. I could not see his face.

"Fred," I said, in a low voice, "you *did* get a letter from Frank Warner for me."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Fred, angrily pushing by.

But I placed myself in front of him.

"No, Fred, you *shall* not put me off; I *will* know. If you don't listen to me, I will break off my engagement to Mr Hardcastle to-day—this very night!"

I used the first argument that came into my head, hardly thinking of what I said, but I would have done it sooner than not know the truth. My brother seemed taken aback.

"What a tragedy-queen air! Good gracious! what is it all about?" he said impatiently.

I drew him to the light of the window, and placed the torn envelope in his hands.

"Explain to me the meaning of this," I said.

"Well?" turning it over and over as if he had never seen it before.

"I found this in your room, Fred."

"What business had you in my room?"

"I was unpacking your things for you."

"I wish to goodness you would mind your own business, and leave my things alone."

"Fred, that is Frank Warner's handwriting, and there was a letter enclosed for me; and the postmark is three weeks old. Where is my letter?"

And then my brother burst out laughing—a loud, harsh laugh in which there was neither mirth nor merriment.

"That's a good joke, upon my word! Why, it's no more Frank's handwriting than it is mine; it is Bob Simond's, my old schoolfellow, and he sent me an enclosure to forward to another fellow we both knew, whose address he had lost—little Tommy Green it was. You have got hold of a fine cock-and-bull story, Maggie! Ha! ha! ha!"

There was a rustling of women's dresses on the staircase, and the two Miss Westons came tripping down.

"What, is it Fred? Oh! do tell us the joke; we shall like so much to hear what you are laughing about!" chirped Anna, the eldest.

"Oh, it's only Maggie, who thought she saw a ghost," answered Fred carelessly, going forward to meet them; and he crushed the torn envelope up in his hand, and tossed it on to the fire as he passed it.

"A ghost! Oh, how dreadful!" lisped Eva,

the second. "Oh, Maggie, did you really? and the eve of your wedding too. Oh! what a bad omen!"

"Don't be so silly as to frighten her," interrupted her sister. "Oh! Maggie, the dresses are so lovely, and they fit us beautifully; only Eva's is a little too high in the throat, and mine drops a little at one side," and so on, etc.

But I went away and left them, knowing in my heart that my brother had told me a falsehood.

And all night long the snow fell, and the wind howled, and the owls screamed wildly among the old chimney-stalks.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW I AM MARRIED.

"Confusion, worse confounded."—*Milton*.

To any one of a gloomy and superstitious turn of mind, that 10th of January would have appeared replete with incidents of an alarming and disastrous character.

My wedding-day was one succession of misfortunes and mischances from its dawn to its close. To begin with, the weather outdid itself in atrocity. It had been freezing up till midnight

then it suddenly thawed rapidly till six o'clock, then the wind veered round again, and it froze hard, and the snow came down in sheets. The result may be imagined; the ground was a sheet of ice; the sky was as black as ink; hurricanes of wind swept through the air, driving the falling snow in whirlwinds before it, and piling it up in heaps against every doorway and upon every window-ledge.

The carriage and post-horses which had been ordered from Rivertown to take us to the church, and which was to have made two journeys to and fro, taking first of all Fred and the Weston girls, and then returning for my father and myself, was so long working its way over the heaps of half-frozen snow, that when it arrived at last we all huddled into it together. Bride, bridesmaids, and all, much to the discomfiture of the young ladies, whose fresh muslin dresses were cruelly crumpled by the process. We had to proceed at a foot-pace. It was bitterly cold; by the time we reached the church-door the bridesmaids' teeth were chattering; the bride's father was blowing upon his frozen finger-tips; Fred was stamping upon my white satin shoes; and the "lovely and interesting bride," as described in the next day's *Rivertown Gazette*, had a very red nose, and could with difficulty retain her hold

of the magnificent bouquet of hot-house exotics in her cramped and stiffened fingers.

At the church matters were still worse. The pew-opener had forgotten to light the stove, the organist, who was to have welcomed us with the joyful strains of the Marriage Hymn, was in bed with bronchitis, and his services had to be dispensed with. Instead of the poetic idea of the bridesmaids awaiting the approach of the bride at the church-porch and the bride entering "leaning upon the arm of her father," we all huddled out of the carriage together anyhow. As a matter of fact I fled into the church alone, in advance of the others, gathering up my white silk skirts ungracefully about me, and remarking to myself, as I did so, that they looked quite dirty beside the dazzling whiteness of the snow—even in that short flight across the churchyard my head and shoulders were plentifully sprinkled with the falling flakes.

The rest of my family followed pell-mell in my footsteps, and we all entered the sacred building in a most undignified scuffle. My father lost his presence of mind, and caught Anna Weston by the arm, and would have carried her off bodily up the aisle, had not Fred come to the rescue and rectified the mistake in time. As it was, one of my bridesmaids, hemmed in by the narrowness of the

passage between the pews, and not having the courage to make a resolute stand, was forced to precede me up the church, the other following meekly in the rear upon my brother's arm.

At length we reached the chancel, where Mr Hardcastle and his best man, a gentleman who was a perfect stranger to me, stood shivering with cold, and with some difficulty, and the help of the parish clerk, who had a wooden leg, and spoke in a loud voice, we managed to get into our proper places, and the service began.

And then a truly awful event happened. The best man, who had undertaken to take charge of it, had forgotten to bring the wedding-ring! The appalling fact having been communicated, in a loud whisper, by the clerk to the clergyman, there was no other course left than to come to a stand-still whilst it was being fetched from the hotel. Mr Reed, our worthy rector, laid the prayer-book face downwards upon the altar, and retiring from the front, began studying his hymn-book with a wrapt and absorbed air, as though deeply interested in its contents.

Mr Leggatt, the best man, posted off, accompanied by Fred, in search of the emblem of Hymen, and we unfortunates waited, shivering and shaking with the cold. There was a titter from the bridesmaids behind me, and a rustle of conversation in

the church beyond; then the clerk brought out a wooden chair from the vestry, and said aloud,—

“ Won’t you sit down, miss?—I mean mum,” which sent the Weston girls off into a regular giggle.

I sat down. Stephen bent down over me and whispered something, I had not the faintest idea what it was; but it was something about his regret and annoyance. I smiled up at him, and tried to look as if I did not mind.

But I minded it dreadfully, it was so wretched, and cheerless, and dreary. I had hard work to prevent myself from crying outright. It seemed as if Mr Leggatt would never come back. Oh! I said to myself, would this miserable ceremony ever come to an end?

At last a joyful whisper through the church proclaimed the return of the messengers. Mr Reed left off reading the hymns, took up the prayer-book again, and returned to the front; the bridesmaids left off giggling, the company left off whispering, the clerk whisked away my wooden chair, and bade me stand up again. The ring having been safely delivered into the bridegroom’s hand, we made a fresh start of it, and this time the service was got through without any further hindrance until, according to the evident opinion of its compilers upon the subject in hand, it ended,—as,

alas! too many marriages undeniably do—in “amazement.”

Afterwards in the vestry I was kissed by a great many people with very cold noses, and a chorus of voices round me kept on repeating how sorry they were, which did not, of course, allude to my being married, but only to the *contretemps* about the ring. Only somehow it struck sadly upon my ears that the first words uttered to me in my married state should be words of regret instead of words of congratulation.

After that, there being nobody to play us out with the customary Wedding March, Mr and Mrs Hardcastle walk down the church in a cheerless silence, and having waited quite five minutes in the porch whilst the coachman of our chariot is being fetched out of the public-house at the corner, whither the hilarity of the occasion and the severity of the weather have combined to retain him, we finally get into the carriage, and are driven back to Follerton at a melancholy foot's-pace.

“It is like going to a funeral,” I say shudderingly.

My husband takes me into his arms and kisses me.

“My poor child, this has been a dreadful ordeal for you! As to Leggatt, I could strangle him! What an ass the man is!”

“Don't have him for your best man next time,”

I say, with an attempt at a playfulness that I do not feel.

"I'll never forgive him for such shameful stupidity and carelessness!" answers my husband savagely, utterly failing to perceive the point of my joke, an omission which depresses me into silence.

Neither did the misadventures of this unlucky day end here. The breakfast party consisted of my husband and myself, my father and brother, the two bridesmaids, an uncle and aunt whom I had never seen since my childhood, Sir Frederick Wilmot and Mr Leggatt, Mr and Mrs Reed, and old Mrs Hardcastle, and if anyone will take the trouble to add up these different items, they will discover that they make up together the fatal number—*thirteen*!

I discovered the fact myself almost directly we sat down, but I discreetly decided to keep my discovery to myself, hoping that nobody else would become aware of the fact.

For some time all went well. The viands were excellent, the wine was of the best, and as it began to circulate freely, tongues became loosened, and the spirits of the party that had been so sorely damped by the weather and the misfortunes of the morning, began to rise. Everybody talked at once; jokes began to be made, laughter to be heard, and

a general spirit of merriment began to make its way round the table.

All at once I perceived Eva Weston looking round the room with little mechanical nods of her head, and ticking off something upon her fingers.

"She is counting," I said to myself, and quaked. "Heaven grant that she may be gifted with imperfect faculties of addition; that she may forget to count herself; that she may mistake a waiter for an invited guest!"

No such luck! In another minute a little hysterical shriek interrupted the genial flow of conversation, and Eva Weston was seen rising excitedly from the table.

"What is the matter?"

"My dear, are you ill?"

"Take my salts!"

"For goodness' sake, Eva, say what ails you?" resounded from all sides of the table.

"Oh!—oh!" cried the little fool, "don't you see? I've counted it three times; we are thirteen!"

A moment's horrified pause upon the reception of this portentous information—a moment during which everybody, I suppose, counted heads for themselves. Then broke forth a chorus of voices, all speaking at once,—

"Why didn't somebody say so before; that Mrs Reed's little girl might have come to take a place?"

"It didn't signify about sitting down, it was the getting up again!" "Who cared about such rubbing superstitions? People sat down thirteen dozens of times in their lives, and nothing ever happened." "Oh! yes it did. So-and-so was one of thirteen at lunch last year, and a lady died within six months." "No, she didn't; she only broke her leg." "No, it was her arm." "At all events, it was very bad luck. Something was sure to happen." "Well, something *had* happened: the cat had jumped on to the side-table and upset the cream-jug!" "How very wrong to make a jest of serious subjects!" And so on, through a very Babel of confusion.

At last Mrs Reed, standing up in her place, was heard piteously entreating Eva to sit down again.

"Pray—pray, my dear, take your place! It would never do for a bridesmaid to get up! Do let me go instead. I assure you I have eaten quite enough—yes, indeed I have, dear Miss Orchester—I mean Mrs Hardcastle. I am sure I beg your pardon. It is so difficult to remember at first. I will go and sit at the sideboard, and I can eat the cake there just as well, and drink your health. Now, do let me, please, my dear, and let Miss Eva Weston sit down again."

So, finally, it was thus settled. Good-natured Mrs Reed retired to the sideboard; and that

little wretch Eva, having made as much mischief and commotion as she possibly could, collapsed into her place again, and the hubbub gradually subsided.

After that, the cake was cut, and the speeches were made. My father almost wept over his own eloquence, and Mrs Reed and my aunt sobbed gently behind their lace handkerchiefs at his pathetic description of the agonising wretch it gave his heart-strings to tear out of them his only daughter.

Fred returned thanks for the bridesmaids very jocosely, but somewhat tediously; and my husband, standing up for three minutes by my side, was understood to say that we—that is, he and I—were very much obliged to everybody all the way round, although I am not to this day quite clear as to what there was to be grateful for.

Finally, having changed my dress, and bidden my father good-bye, my husband and I were driven away at last from the doors of dear old Follerton—I, drowned in tears, and he in a very bad temper with his valet, who had forgotten to bring his dressing-bag from the hotel.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW I GO FOR MY HONEYMOON.

"Thank Heaven for a good man's love."—*Shakespeare.*

WE went to Paris, to an hotel in the Place Vendome. It was all new and wonderful and delightful to me. I had never been out of England before, and the utter change of scene, the brightness and charm of the gay capital, and the novelty of everything I saw and heard filled me with an ever-increasing pleasure.

I was unfeignedly happy, and Stephen was the most devoted of lovers. I say lover advisedly, for, although he was my husband he was only now beginning to show me the whole treasure of his love and devotion. I had not dreamt that he could love so tenderly and so deeply. It filled me with a perpetual surprise, and an unceasing desire to make him some return worthy of his affection.

"What had I done," I said to myself, "to win so much love? and in what could I show my gratitude for it?"

It was not only that he spared no pains to give me pleasure and entertainment—that he took me to see everything that could interest and amuse me—that he showered presents upon me until I felt ashamed of accepting so much from him, giving me constantly valuable jewellery of all kinds, and

supplementing my somewhat scanty and countrified *trousseau* with dresses from Worth, and with rare laces and priceless furs, that seemed to me to be far too good and grand for such a simple little personage as myself—but he gave me also what I valued far more than all these other gifts: an unwearying interest in the smallest matter that concerned me, the kindest solicitude for my health and comfort, and the most affectionate regard for my tastes and inclinations.

I said to myself that I had married a model husband, and the discovery almost distressed me. He was too good for me. How had I deserved such a piece of good fortune, I who had taken him for so many mixed motives, none of which was of the purest and best? I was like the man in the fable who, carrying the bag of stones at the prayer of the beggar by the wayside, found, when he reached his home, that the sack was filled with money. I had thought to find flints, and behold! I had been carrying gold pieces unawares.

This man must be almost perfect; upright, honourable, and truthful as the day—that I had known before—but he was also, it seemed, affectionate as a child, tender as a woman, and full of strong ardent feelings, which did credit to his manhood. And he had chosen *me*, Margaret Orchester, for his queen, upon whom to waste the treasures of .

his goodness and his love! Oh! it was too much for me! I was not worthy of it! And when I thought upon it, it actually disturbed me.

"How can I repay you for all your goodness to me?" I said to him one evening when we were coming home together through the brilliantly-lighted streets towards our hotel. I leant upon his arm, and my disengaged hand was full of little parcels—presents which his generosity daily lavished upon me. I looked up into his face as I spoke.

"Love me," he answered simply, pressing my arm to his side; "that is all I ask of you."

I hung my head. I could not answer him with conventional assurances of my affection and esteem, they would not have satisfied him; such love as I had for him now was not what he wanted. Come what might, I would never speak smooth words to him to deceive him; from my lips he should never hear any words but the truth.

"I think it will come," I said, in a very low voice, "if you will only give me time. I do not see how it could fail to do so—you are so good to me."

"Does goodness breed love?" he asked, rather wearily, as it seemed to me, and sighed as he spoke.

He had never deluded himself about my feelings for him; he knew too well what was the truth; but he had taken his fate into his own hands, and,

like many another rash man before him, had married a woman who liked but did not love him, hoping to turn the liking into love afterwards.

"Such goodness as *yours* must do so in the end!" I said, warmly.

"I am *not* good," he answered quickly; "pray never say that to me—God knows how far I am from it!"

"But you are *true*!" I said earnestly. "Did you ever know what it was to feel a perfect trust in a person, to be *sure* of his faith and his sincerity, to believe in him as one believes in one's religion? Well, that is how I believe in *you*!"

"Oh! hush!"

He put up his hand quickly, as though to stop the current of my words.

"Nay, but I will not hush!" I cried, smiling, "because you deserve it, Stephen. Heaven and earth might change their respective places before I could believe that you would tell me a lie!"

We turned into the hotel entrance as I spoke, and as the gaslight fell upon his face, I noticed, with a start, that it was pale and haggard, like the face of an old man.

"Stephen, you are ill, surely!" I exclaimed anxiously.

"No—no—only a little tired and faint. Go up, my dear—go up to our rooms."

I preceded him upstairs, and when we reached our little sitting-room, I was relieved to find that his colour had returned, and that the faintness he had complained of seemed to have passed away.

It was about this time that we made the acquaintance of some new friends, a Mrs and Miss Thirlwall, whom we met by chance at the *table-d'hôte* of the hotel. The mother looked very ill: she was tall and slight, and had a perpetual cough that seemed to shake her slender frame frightfully; she was evidently consumptive; the daughter, on the contrary, was plump and rosy, a pretty little thing, with soft, kittenish ways, and bright piquant features. They attracted our interest from the first; and Stephen having discovered that he had known something of the late Mr Thirlwall many years ago, when he had come across him in a matter of business, this slight introduction laid a sufficient foundation for our making friends with them.

The too evidently hopeless condition of the widow, and the utter ignorance of her real state displayed by the pretty daughter, together with the girl's solicitude over her mother's health, and the mother's anxiety lest her child should suspect the truth, was to me a most sad and touching spectacle.

"We have been abroad for some time for mamma's health," Nina Thirlwall would say to me; "but she is very much better now, and we are on our way

home. You don't think she looks delicate, do you, Mrs Hardcastle?"

"She does not look very strong," I answered evasively.

"No, not *very* strong, certainly; but if you had seen her a year ago you would see how much better she is. Of course I must be careful of her; but she has such a longing to get home to our own dear little house in Devonshire. I am sure she will get quite well when once we are at home. Have you not heard that when invalids fancy a thing very much indeed, it always does them good?"

"Yes, I have heard so."

The same day the mother said to me,—

"I am going home to die, Mrs Hardcastle."

"Oh! don't say that, Mrs Thirlwall. I hope and trust you may get much better."

She shook her head.

"No, no, I know better. I cannot last very long; being abroad has done me no good; and I am sick of hotel life. I want to go home and be buried in our dear little churchyard. But I don't want Nina to know it. She has not said anything to you, has she?"

"Your daughter tells me she thinks you are much stronger than you were a year ago. She thinks the return to your home comforts will do you so much good."

She smiled sadly.

"I am glad she thinks so. Pray, dear Mrs Hardcastle, never let her suspect the truth. I want my child's life to be a happy one as long as I can make it so. God knows that the shock will be bad enough for her to bear when it comes; and she will be friendless indeed when I leave her. Do you know, Mrs Hardcastle, I have not a friend or a relative in the world with whom she can go and live after I am gone, only a bachelor uncle, a brother of her father's, whom I have a very bad opinion of, and an old aunt of my own, who is blind, and whose life would be a very sad and melancholy one for my bright darling to share. Does it not seem hard?"

I felt deeply for the poor woman; the anxiety concerning her child's future evidently weighed so heavily upon her. Nina, as it appeared, would not be left badly off in the matter of money; indeed her little fortune, together with her pretty face and charming manners, would probably combine to bring her a husband ere long. I suggested this solution to Mrs Thirlwall.

"If I could see her happily married I could die contented," she answered earnestly; "but Nina has been difficult to please; she has never yet seen any man whom she could love well enough to marry, and I am sure you will agree with me, Mrs

Hardcastle, that I should do wrong to urge her into marriage. Nothing can be so terrible for woman as to marry a man she does not love entirely."

A feeling of guilty shame kept me silent. How far this good woman was from suspecting that this was my own case!

On several occasions we took Nina Thirlwall out with us to theatres and concerts. Her mother, whose health was utterly unequal to the exertions of late hours and hot rooms, was grateful to us for procuring for her daughter the pleasures she was not able to give her herself. Stephen and I both became fond of little Nina; we were not, perhaps, a sufficiently devoted couple to care for a perpetually uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*. To myself, indeed, the presence of a third person was an actual relief; and it almost struck me that my husband also regarded it as such. It was a very singular thing that I could not help fancying that Stephen dreaded being long alone with me. I could not account for it at all, knowing how devotedly he loved me; but more than once the sudden entrance of Nina Thirlwall into our little sitting-room was hailed by him so gladly and joyfully that it gave me a feeling of painful surprise.

Once or twice he took Nina out in the afternoon by herself, on days when I was tired or

disinclined to go out, and I was glad that he should have the change of companionship, for it was becoming more and more impressed upon me that my husband was anything but happy. How often does it not happen when a man has attained all that his heart has desired, the realisation of his dreams is but bitterness and disappointment?

One day, about three weeks after our marriage, my husband had taken Nina out to the Louvre; it was one of Mrs Thirlwall's bad days, and she was lying down in her room. I was alone in mine dreaming rather sadly over the miserable failure that so many people seem to make of their lives, when I was suddenly surprised by hearing a strange voice in the sitting-room next door; it was strange and yet familiar. Who could it be?

The door communicating between the rooms was opened by my maid.

"A lady, ma'am, wishes to see you."

"A lady? What is her name?"

"Mrs Frank Warner, ma'am."

I rose, trembling, and filled with a sudden terror, and passed into the adjoining room fearing I know not what; and as I entered, Helen came to meet me with outstretched hands.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW I MEET HELEN.

"And the truth shall ever come uppermost."
C. Mackay.

I CAST a rapid, almost terrified, glance round the room. Thank Heaven, she was alone!

"My darling Maggie," she cried, "how delighted I am to find you in! I hardly dared to expect such luck, for we are passing through Paris on our way home, and I only learnt your address by accident this morning from the Thompsons, you know, from Rivertown, who told me they met you in the Louvre the other day, so I thought I must just try and find you; and I've sent Frank on to do some shopping by himself, and he will call for me presently, and— But what is the matter, Maggie? How strangely you look at me!"

"Do I?" I answered mechanically. "Won't you sit down?"

But Helen would not sit down; she came close to me and took hold of my hand.

"There is something wrong, Maggie. What is it?"

"*Something!*" I echoed bitterly. "Is not everything wrong?" and I wrenched my hand out of hers, turning away from her as I did so.

"Maggie," said my old friend, in a very quiet voice, "you do not think, do you, that I could blame you for—for your marriage, dear? I confess it *was* a surprise to me. You might have waited, I thought, just a little longer, just to see; and perhaps you are sorry now that you did not; but our lives are so strangely ordered for us; sometimes I think we have no hand whatever in our own destinies. And now you are married, and I hear to such a good man too; and I suppose you changed your mind about poor Frank; but what with the uncertainty about him and all—oh! yes, I can quite understand it, dear; and do not imagine for a minute that I should blame you in any way; there is no reason why we should ever revert to the past again, either of us; and of course the other was a most imprudent engagement. But now that you are married so well—"

"What on earth are you talking about?" I said, slowly turning round and facing her, and I suppose my face must have shown the utter bewilderment her rambling words created in my mind.

I could not understand one single word that she said. It was all a confused jumble of meaningless sentences strung together. I could make nothing of them. What did she mean by telling me she did not blame me for my marriage? How could *she*, who had stolen my lover, possibly cast any

blame at *me*? Was not such a suggestion from her to me an actual insult? And why did she say I might have waited "a little longer just to see"? Why should I have waited, and what should I have seen had I done so? Had Helen gone out of her mind, or was it I who was losing my senses?

I think in my intense confusion that I laughed harshly and gratingly, as it seemed even to my own ears, and told her that she was talking to me in riddles.

She clasped her hands together, looking up into my face with an expression of piteous entreaty.

"Dear, dearest Maggie," she cried, "for the sake of our old friendship, and the happy days when we were children together, I entreat you to explain this extraordinary estrangement that has sprung up between us. I could not think why you wrote to me so coldly about my marriage. I saw something was wrong by your letter; it was so cold, and short, and formal, only I had no time then to write again; and I felt sure that when we met, any little misunderstanding between us could be so easily put right. And now your manner to me is so strange and unnatural. Do not stand looking like *that* at me, Maggie! What have I done to you? Pray, pray explain the meaning of it all."

"Why should I explain?" I began coldly.

"For Heaven's sake speak quickly!" cried Helen eagerly. "I can hear my husband coming upstairs; it is his voice; make haste, or we shall be interrupted."

"Then let your husband hear, too, what I have to say!" I exclaimed passionately; "if you both have betrayed and deceived me, why should he not hear, too, of the contempt and the indignation with which I regard him as well as you?"

"*Maggie!*" cried Helen, falling a step away from me, and looking at me with absolute horror.

"Mr Warner," said the waiter, throwing open the door; and there entered a man whom I had never set eyes on in my life before.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Helen clung to the arm of her husband, who appeared surprised—as well he might. I looked from one to the other in blank amazement.

"Who is this?" I faltered, below my breath.

"It is my husband, Maggie. Won't you shake hands with him? He has been wanting to know you for so long. Don't look so surprised, Frank. Mrs Hardcastle is not quite herself—not quite well to-day; she will be better presently; won't you, Maggie, dear?"

But of the broken excuses whereby she sought to make apologies for me I heard not one single word. I sank down into a chair, and flinging my

arms across the table, I bowed down my miserable head upon them, and for the first and last time in my life I burst into a violent fit of hysterics.

When I recovered myself somewhat, I found that Helen was alone with me; her husband had, at a hint from her, I imagine, left us together.

I stretched out my arms wildly to her.

"Oh, Helen!—Helen!" I cried despairingly, "then where is he—my Frank—my own love—whom I thought had been false to me?"

And then all at once Helen perceived what was the delusion in my mind.

"Oh! Maggie, you thought it was *your* Frank whom I had married! Oh! how could you think it? Did you never get my letter, then, in which I told you how my other cousin Frank—Uncle Hervey's son, not Uncle Francis'—had come abroad to join us?"

"No, I never got it. Was it written from Genoa?"

"Yes. Ah! I feared at the time that it had never reached you; and I told you in it about poor Frank—your Frank, you know; but of course you must have seen it in the papers!"

"No, I saw nothing; for Heaven's sake tell me! What has happened to him?"

Helen looked inexpressibly shocked.

"Did you not see about that dreadful tragedy in

the West Indies, how they were murdered by those horrible savages?"

And then it all became clear to me. Suddenly Mrs Hardcastle's breakfast-table came back to me, the spirit-lamp under the urn which would not blow out, the omelette that was badly made, and the old lady sitting opposite me with her spectacles on her nose reading the horrible story to me out of the *Times* which had made me shudder a little, but which, because I had no one concerned in it, had left so little impression on my mind.

"And he was killed!" I said, in a scared whisper, the horror of it shaking me from head to foot.

"No, no, thank God! it was a mistake about him; they were not all killed. Two escaped; they were only taken captive, and Frank was one of them.

"There was an expedition sent out to rescue them. He has suffered horribly; I fear his health has been utterly shattered, but still he has been mercifully spared to us. He is expected home almost directly. But surely, Maggie, he has written to you himself?"

"Not a single line."

"But yes; I know that he did, for he wrote to me just before he was starting to come home, and told me that he had just written to you and enclosed the letter to Fred."

And then it all became as plain as daylight to me. The torn envelope that I had found amongst my brother's things, his shuffling manner, his agitation when I had accused him of having kept my letter, his unsatisfactory words which, even at the time that he spoke them, I had felt instinctively convinced to be untrue, all became clear to me. Frank had written to me, and had my brother delivered his letter to me, I should have received it three weeks before my wedding-day, and it would have saved me.

And it was for *that* that Fred had deceived me, so that nothing might stop my being married to the man who was to advance his own interests,—for that selfish, paltry motive he had sacrificed my life's happiness. To Fred my mistake about the identity of Helen's husband must have appeared in the light of an amusing joke. What had been a bitter reality to me, had been to him but a fortunate error which had prevented me from becoming aware of the truth. For to Fred who knew what had happened to my lover there could have been no mystery whatever in the name of Helen's husband. Whilst I was breaking my heart, Fred must have been chuckling to himself over my misapprehensions. And it was my only brother, whom I had loved so ardently all my life, who had played me this mean, shabby trick! It was the downfall of my idol.

I turned away from Helen, wringing my hands together with a low moan of pain.

"How came you to make such a mistake?" she continued, more to herself than me. "I cannot understand it. Did you not know that Uncle Francis, your Frank's father, lived in Cumberland? He was the eldest brother. The Mr Warner you met at dinner is a barrister. I had never seen any of his family till I met his son abroad. My husband was a perfect stranger to me, although he was my cousin."

"I had never heard Frank talk of his father. You forget, Helen, how very short was our friendship, and that we were parted directly we were engaged. He may certainly have mentioned his father. If he did, I do not particularly remember what he said of him; and when your uncle spoke of his son Frank, what was I to think?"

"And you never got my letter, which would have told you all? That was the most fatal thing."

"No, I never got it," I answered drearily, leaning my head upon my hands. "It has been a series of miserable mistakes and deceptions all through."

"What I cannot understand," pursued Helen, puckering up her forehead in a puzzled way, "is that Mr Hardcastle should not have known that there were two Frank Warners, for it seems that he has known my Uncle Hervey for ages."

"Mr Hardcastle!" I exclaimed, looking up quickly. "Oh, of course, he did not know. Had he had the faintest suspicion, he would have told me at once. You little know my husband, Helen," I added, with a proud smile.

"Oh! of course, dear, you know best," Helen hastened to say. "Only I thought, if he was very anxious to marry you, and he found that you really believed in the mistake about the two cousins—"

"Quite impossible!" I interrupted, somewhat hotly, and flushing angrily at the bare suggestion. "Stephen Hardcastle is the soul of honour. Pray never mention such a thing to me again, Helen."

"Pray forgive me, dear Maggie, in saying so. And now, I fear, I must go," she said, rising.

I kissed her affectionately, and entreated her to forgive me for all my unjust suspicions of herself. I told her how totally I had misunderstood the letter in which she had announced her marriage to me.

"Do not speak of it again," she said, kissing me. "Only, oh! it is all so sad, Maggie, dear, and I feel such an intense pity for you."

"Hush!" I said softly, laying my hand upon her lips. "It is all over now, and we must never speak of it again. Remember, I am married now, and my husband is the best and the kindest any woman could have. He must never know that—that my heart is half-broken. But, oh!" I wailed suddenly,

with an uncontrollable gush of bitter tears—"oh! what am I to say to Frank when he comes?"

She could say no word to comfort me upon that score. How could she? There was nothing to say, nothing to be done. It was all hopeless, and helpless, and dreary, and my burden would have to be borne alone.

She could only kiss me again, murmuring fond, useless words as she did so, and telling me over and over again how full of pity and compassion she felt for me.

And then she left me sitting alone in my misery amid the tawdry furniture of the little French *salon*.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW I AM LEFT ALONE.

"Conscience does make cowards of us all."

Shakespeare.

I DON'T think I shall ever forget that same little French *salon* at the hotel in the Place Vendome—not if I grow to be quite an old woman, not if my memory grows dim, and the light of my eyes becomes quenched in darkness, and my ears are dulled into an eternal silence. I shall always remember the high, narrow room, with its two tall French windows—I shall always see before me the red velvet chairs ranged round the wall; the huge

chandelier hanging from the ceiling over the round table in the middle; the lace curtains tied up with blue ribbons; the sofa, with its shabby gilded arms; and I shall always hear the slow, melancholy ticking of the or'molu clock upon the marble chimney-piece, whereon the goddess Diana interminably drew her bow, and the stag at which she aimed her arrow unceasingly escaped her by standing on its two hind legs.

I don't know how long I sat there alone. It might have been only ten minutes, it might have been three-quarters of an hour. I took no heed of time. The whole of my faculties, mental and physical, were absorbed in one intense effort.

I was trying to realise what had happened to me. Something had happened that had altered me for ever, that had made another woman of me, that had blighted my whole life, as the summer leaves of the forest are blighted by the first frost of the autumn.

What was this something? I had married my husband from a certain set of motives. They were not, it is true, very high or elevated motives; but still, such as they were, they had been sufficient to make me undertake my new responsibilities with a fair amount of interest and energy. I had determined to begin my life afresh, to wipe out the old chapters of my story, and to make myself happy with the good things which Providence had put

before me. And I had been happy. It had not been rapturous joy, but it had been at least the calmness of content.

But how would it be with me now?—now that these motives, upon which I had built my happiness, had crumbled away beneath my feet—now that I knew they had never had any existence, save in the imaginations of my own brain—now that the truth was laid bare to me? I had been tricked into marrying Stephen Hardcastle, partly by my own foolish blindness, and partly by my brother's shameful duplicity.

And then there was a question which kept again and again coming back to me, and which in vain I pushed back and kept at arm's length, as it were, from my mind: Had my husband, indeed, been guiltless in the matter?

I had been very brave and decided as long as Helen was with me. I had put a bold face upon it. I had told her that deception was an impossibility to him. But, when I was left alone with my own thoughts, was I quite so sure of it?

A horrible haunting idea that my husband, too, had been in the plot against me kept ever recurring to my mind with a frightful persistency. I remembered, and shuddered at the tenacity of my own memory, even as I remembered, how strangely he had looked at me sometimes—what a sudden

pallor had once or twice overspread his countenance at some chance word of mine—how I had noticed of late that he avoided being long alone with me. Was not that since the day when I had so impulsively told him how entirely and unreservedly I trusted and believed in him? And, worse than all, I recollected, with an agonising distinctness, those strange, passionate words he had once spoken to me when he had clasped me to his heart in his mother's drawing-room in London. "What is there I would not do?" he had cried. "What madness would I not be guilty of, what depth of degradation would I not wade through, to make you my own?"

What had been the meaning of those wild words? Had they not been spoken on the very evening when I had met Mr Hervey Warner, and when I had told Stephen that *his* son was my lover? Was it possible that he, too, knew of my error, and allowed me to continue in my mistake, so that he himself might win me? If this were so, then, what was to become of my married life? What chance had I of happiness ever more?

So I sat on in the silence of the little room till the short winter afternoon closed in—till the fire-light, flickering faintly over the white and gold paper of the walls, was the only light in the room. I sat with my head leaning upon my hand, staring idly into the wood fire. Now and then the logs

fell in with a crash, and a shower of blue sparks sprang up, and a little flame darted forth and flickered merrily for a few minutes over the folds of my heavy winter dress, then died away again into a deeper gloom than before.

Presently I heard the door of the adjoining room open, and some one moving about in it. It was my maid, I supposed, putting out my evening-dress. I listened mechanically to the sound of her footsteps going backwards and forwards across the room and, as it seemed, on to my husband's dressing-room beyond. I heard the opening and shutting of drawers, and then something dropped apparently heavily on the floor. How careless that woman was! I said to myself—she was always knocking the things off the table—and what a long time she was about it to-night!

We were to go to the opera that evening. It must be time for me to dress. But I did not move. What heart had I to array myself in satin and velvet?

A minute later, the bedroom door closed softly, and all was quiet again. I scarcely noticed it, I was so absorbed in my own painful thoughts, for I was slowly and surely making up my mind to do something which it almost frightened me to think of. I was saying to myself that if, indeed, Stephen Hardcastle had tricked and deceived me into marrying him, then I would be a wife no longer to him;

I would leave him; I would tell him to his face that I hated and loathed him, and I would turn my back upon him for ever.

I felt angry and bitter against him. The dawning love that had been slowly awakening in my heart since our marriage day was crushed and smothered within me. I thought of my young lover, whom I had loved, who had entreated me to be true to him, and who had been languishing in a horrible captivity, whilst I, who should have been mourning and praying for him, was being wooed and wedded, unconscious of his sufferings and of his misery.

Life had been hard for me; things had combined too strongly against me. I felt full of angry rebellion against my fate. Marriage vows thus wrested out of one were surely no longer binding; how could I continue to live with a man whom I had never loved, and whom I had ceased to honour? I would leave him; and yet, as I made the resolve, I trembled. I must at any rate see him first. I said to myself that I would not condemn him unheard. I would be just to him. He should tell his own story, and unconsciously to myself, there was an aching longing at my heart that he might be able to clear himself—that he might deny all participation in my brother's deception. Oh! if he only could!

All this while it did not occur to me to notice

how late it was getting, nor to wonder why my husband had not returned long ago.

Suddenly the door opened, and Nina Thirlwall entered, followed immediately by a waiter, bearing a lamp.

"What! sitting all alone in the dark?" she exclaimed. "And you are not dressed, Mrs Hardcastle! Are you not going, then?"

I stood up mechanically, and looked at her. She was dressed in a pale blue dress covered with lace, and a thick fur cloak was over her arm. She was buttoning on her gloves as she came in.

"Going where, Nina?" I asked wondering.

"Why, to dine with the De Maupins, at their house in the Champs Elysées—those nice French people whose acquaintance we made the other day. We met them, and they asked us to dinner, and we are to go to the opera afterwards, and I am to go with you. Mamma says I may go. Did not your husband tell you?"

"My husband!" I repeated blankly. "Where is he?"

"Oh, he came in an hour ago—we came in together. We met the De Maupins as we were coming out of the Louvre. You will be so late, Mrs Hardcastle; do go and dress."

At this minute my maid, entering the room, asked me what dress I would wear.

"What dress? Why, you put it out ages ago. I heard you in my room."

"Indeed, ma'am, I am very sorry; but I went out for a little turn and lost my way in these dreadful streets—there's so many of them, you see, and all with such outlandish foreign names—I did think I never should back here, and that is why I am so late, ma'am; and I am sure I hope you will pardon me; it shall not happen again."

I pushed by her, and flew to the door of my room; a sudden nameless terror filled my heart. The maid and Nina followed me with the lamp; I think they were frightened by my scared face. I entered my room; it was empty. Breathlessly I passed on through the door beyond it into my husband's dressing-room, which was half-open.

Tremblingly I pressed forward. The wardrobe was wide open and utterly empty; his brushes and all his little knickknacks had been cleared off the dressing-table, his coat from the nail on the door where it had hung, his dressing-bag from off the little table in the window, his portmanteau from the corner where it had stood—all were gone.

"Law, ma'am! the master must have gone away!" exclaimed the lady's-maid, with consternation mingled with the delight in a catastrophe such as is always experienced by persons of her class.

"I don't want you, Hawkins; you may go," I said

shortly, and I was left alone with Nina. "Tell me at once," I cried breathlessly, "what happened when you were out with him? Was he ill? had anything upset him?"

Nina put the lamp down upon the table before answering me.

"I don't think he was ill," she said quietly, as though endeavouring to recall what had occurred. "We met the De Maupins at the door of the Louvre, they walked a little way with us, and then, when they left us, we walked straight home. A lady stopped and spoke to us at the corner of the street—an English lady."

"Ah—tell me what she was like?"

"She had fair hair—she was very pretty; and she stopped and asked your husband if his name was not Hardcastle?"

"Yes; what did she say?"

"I did not hear; I looked in at a shop window whilst they were talking."

"It was Helen!" I said aloud, not remembering that Nina would not understand me; "and my husband has gone!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW MR HARDCASTLE WROTE TO ME.

"To weep that trust and that deceiving."

F. A. Kemble.

NINA was looking about the room; even at this moment, when I was so full of my troubles, I could not help remarking how quiet and self-controlled this young girl was.

She had uttered no cries, no useless words of pity or condolence; she had simply answered the questions I had asked her, without comment or remark.

She seemed now to be searching for something. I had sunk down into a chair, overpowered by a sense of helpless loneliness, and I watched her movements mechanically. She hunted about on the chest of drawers, and on the dressing-table, and finally on a little writing-table, littered over with parcels and papers, and with all sorts of little ornaments which my husband had purchased for me during our daily walks.

"Dear Mrs Hardcastle," she cried suddenly, "here is a letter for you; it must be from your husband. I felt sure there must be one from him somewhere; he will have explained his departure in it. You will soon be happier about him."

She placed a thick envelope in my hands addressed to myself, and kissing me softly on the forehead as she went, left me alone. Tremblingly I broke the seal, and read the letter which he had written to me:—

“MY WIFE,—When you open this letter I shall have left Paris. You will be at no loss to guess the reason. I have met Mrs Warner in the street, and she told me that she came from seeing you. The truth, which I believe you have often guessed, must now be fully revealed to you. You will know your husband now for what he is, and *you will not forgive me!* If you loved me you might, perhaps, do so in time; but you do not love me, and that implicit confidence in me which you have professed, and which was the only hold I have been able to gain over you, will be shattered for ever! I am unable to bear your reproaches. Cruel words of hatred and disgust from your sweet lips would kill me: and therefore, my wife—oh! beloved and sinned for in vain—therefore I leave you

“Will you have patience with me for a little space whilst I tell you the story of my temptation and of my fall? Long ago, before I ever spoke to you of my love, I knew the name of my rival: your brother told me. He told me, too, that your acquaintance with him was of recent date, and that

he did not believe you to be deeply attached to him. It was that, I think, that first gave me the hope that I might win you. Your brother assured me that, from a worldly point of view, the match was an undesirable one; in short, he allowed me plainly to see that your father and he would be in favour of my suit rather than of Mr Frank Warner's, should I press it. Perhaps it was natural that he should say so, knowing to what an extent your family were dependent upon me.

"After that came the news in the paper of the murder of the sailors of the 'Antigone.' Your lover's name was mentioned in full as one of the victims. I dreaded the effect upon you; but when I came down to Follerton the same day, I found that you had not even seen a paper, and that by some oversight your father had not noticed the paragraph.

"At first I thought it a kindness not to tell you; you would hear of it in time I supposed, and meanwhile your visit to Harley Street was impending. My whole heart was set upon that visit. I was determined that nothing should prevent your going there. To get you to my mother's house was such an enormous step in my favour; and believing, as I did, that your lover was dead, I saw that I must win my cause in time.

"Then there came simultaneously the report of

his being alive, and your singular mistake with regard to his cousin. The first reduced me to despair; the second opened the door of hope once more to me. If you believed him to be unworthy of you, my cause was won at once! You little thought that night that we were alone in the drawing-room at Harley Street—the night of the dinner-party—what a terrible conflict was going on within me, when you turned your eyes upon me, love, all wet with tears, and entreated me so pitiously to tell you if there was not some horrible mistake. I had hard work to keep my iniquitous resolve. To deceive you was the most terrible task I had ever had to perform. But it was *yourself* that was in the balance, and that made the temptation too strong for me.

“I have no other excuse but my love. Sufficient to say that I yielded to the voice of evil which tempted me, and I allowed you to continue in your mistake. Once married to me, I fancied in my folly that you would learn to love me and to forgive me all. I hurried our wedding forward as much as I dared; I knew that discovery of the truth must soon come to you, and I knew also that at any minute Frank Warner might return. I thought that once married I should not care; but my life since our marriage has been as much a torture as a delight. I have never had a moment

of peace. Remorse for what I had done ; dread of a discovery of the truth, which I knew the first sight of Mrs Warner must infallibly bring ; but, worse than all, the conviction that I had no power over your heart, have rendered the few weeks of our married life almost too terrible to be borne. Only the other day, when you stung me to the heart by speaking of your trust and belief in ' my goodness,' I well-nigh told you all—only that I was too great a coward to ruin my brief delirium of happiness with my own hands. But now, Maggie, that you know by what a system of fraud I induced you to marry me, now I am leaving you for ever. I know that of your own free will you will not wish to live with me any longer, and I will not bear the anguish of hearing you say so. I cannot compel you to remain with me against your will. I believe that I am now doing the only service which it is in my power to render you, by relieving you of a presence which must be hateful and repulsive to you. You, who are truth itself, how could you live with one who has cheated and deceived you so basely ? The only thing I ask of you is that you will not increase my shame and punishment by declining to receive from me the allowance which I shall place in the hands of your trustees for your use, that is the only reminder of my existence which I will force upon you. And

now farewell. I know your nature too well to believe that you will ever forgive me; but remember always through all, and in spite of all, that I have loved you very dearly. S. H."

The letter fluttered from my nerveless fingers upon the floor. I sat quite still, in a sort of numb, feelingless apathy. It was as if I had lost the power of thought and of sensation,—as if I were not myself, but were reading the story of some one else,—some one in no way connected with me. I felt as one just awakened out of sleep, who cannot remember what happened when he lay down to rest; something had happened to me—what was it? Presently I got up, and began to move slowly about the room. I touched the little odds and ends on my dressing-table, then I caught sight of my own face in the glass, and almost started at my wild and haggard appearance.

Could it be true that my husband had left me?—that he would never come back to me again?—that I was to live my life henceforth without him? Curiously enough, it was not just then the certainty of his deception towards me that impressed me so much, as the fact of his having left me in consequence of it. Why should he leave me? I asked myself wearily. It had seemed easy enough to me to effect a separation between us by my own act;

but now that he had taken the vengeance I had prepared for him out of my hands, the strength of my indignation against him seemed to have half died away. Why was he so sure that I should never forgive him? Was I indeed so hard and pitiless, and so utterly without affection towards him? Was it thus that he had read my character? Perhaps he was right; perhaps he had but judged me truly. Had he stayed to plead his own cause, it is certain that I should have been very bitter against him, and very relentless in my determination to leave him. But now that he had forestalled my intentions and gone of his own accord, I only felt a vague sense of desolation and loneliness.

A soft tap at the door disturbed me, and Mrs Thirlwall came gently into my room.

"My dear, I hear from Nina that you are in trouble—can I not help you?"

She held out her soft, motherly arms to me, and with a sob, like a tired child, my head sunk down upon her shoulder.

"Oh! I am very miserable!" I cried, weeping.

"Poor child! will you not tell me your trouble?"

"No, I said, raising my head with a sudden pride. "No; for how can a woman speak against her husband. I cannot tell you why it is so, but he has left me."

"But only for a time, I trust, my poor child."

I shook my head.

"I don't know. But, oh! what shall I do, left alone in a foreign country?" and I burst into a flood of passionate tears.

"You shall not be left alone, Maggie. You must go back to your father's house."

And then I wept anew. Oh! it was not without cause that my wedding-day had been so disastrous, A three weeks' bride to come back alone to her father's house! What would be thought of me and of him. And my face tingled with a shame that was to the full as poignant on his account whose name I bore as on my own.

"Oh! dear Mrs Thirlwall, must I indeed go back alone?" I cried piteously.

"No, Maggie, not alone, for I shall go back with you. We will start for London to-morrow, for the sooner you are under your father's protection the better. It is there where your husband will return to fetch you when this misunderstanding between you—for I feel sure it can be nothing more—has been cleared away. Ring the bell for your maid to pack your things, and we will all start to-morrow by the early train."

A violent paroxysm of coughing interrupted her, and reminded me that this woman, who but a week ago was a perfect stranger to me, had risen from her bed to come and comfort me in my trouble.

"You are not fit to go!" I cried remorsefully.
"How selfish I am to forget how ill you are!"

She smiled and held up her hand to arrest my words. She could scarcely speak.

"Do—as—I tell you," she gasped. "I shall be better in the morning."

And she left me.

I summoned my maid, and bade her pack my things, cutting short her astonished exclamations and questions by ordering her to obey me in silence.

Mrs Thirlwall was as good as her word. We started for England the next morning; and when we got to London she left Nina at the house of a friend, and took me down to Rivertown station herself, and saw me safely into a fly at the station, meaning to return to London by the next train.

"I can never repay you for all your goodness to me!" I cried, as I kissed her tearfully.

She held my two hands in her own, and looked at me earnestly.

"Yes, Maggie, you can if you will," she answered, and her pale sweet face lighted up with a sudden glow of emotion.

"Tell me what I can do for you?" I cried eagerly.

"You can make me a promise which will comfort me when I am dying."

"Oh! Mrs Thirlwall, I would do anything in the world for you."

"Will you give my child a home when I am gone?"

I cast my arms round her neck, and assured her that Nina should be as a sister to me. She bade me farewell. And I never saw her again.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW MY LOVER CAME BACK TO ME.

"But all was false and hollow."—*Milton*.

AND thus it came to pass that, when Frank Warner came home at last, he found me—as I had told him I should be found—at Follerton, where he had left me, awaiting his return.

But, ah! with what different feelings I waited for his coming to those with which I had once thought to welcome back my lover.

The day of his return was the day of all others I dreaded and feared the most. If it had been in any way possible, I would have written to him, to have prevented his coming to Riverton, for to Riverton I knew he would come without a moment's delay, the instant he set foot in England. But I did not know where to write, neither did Helen, to whom I appealed for help, and who wrote to me from London, where she was now living, to say that she

believed that Frank had already started on his way home, but that, unless by some chance she saw him in London on his arrival, she did not know how his going down to Riverton could be stopped.

So I waited for him, lonely and miserable enough, in my old home.

My father was ill ; he kept a good deal to his own room. I found him very much aged and altered ; perhaps the severe winter had tried him overmuch, or perhaps he was only growing old. He was very feeble, and at times his mind was weak and wandering. He never could be quite made to understand how it was that I was at home again ; and every day when I wished him good-morning, he would ask me after my husband.

"Is he not coming down to-day, Maggie?" he would say querulously ; and I used to answer, as I kissed him,—

"Not to-day, papa."

"Ah ! that is strange," he would reply thoughtfully ; "but perhaps you will hear from him to-morrow."

"Perhaps."

But I made no effort to explain to him how that Stephen and I were so absolutely parted, that I literally did not know even where he was. I was thankful to feel that my father, at least, whatever may have been his faults, and however selfishly

he had sacrificed me to his own welfare, had, at all events, been entirely ignorant of the deception which my brother had practised upon me. He had never known of my engagement to Frank, and I liked to think that, had he known of it, he would, at all events, not have joined in the conspiracy against me.

As to Fred, his conduct was characteristic. To a long letter of passionate and angry reproaches, which I had written to him on my return home, he had answered briefly thus :—

“DEAR MADGE,—Very sorry you take it to heart so much, but you make a great fuss about nothing, and use a great many big words. Nobody ‘deceived’ you, as you call it; you made a very stupid mistake, and I really don’t see that any one was to blame for it but yourself. With regard to my keeping back from you Frank’s letter when he came to life again, as your wedding-day was then fixed, it was about the kindest thing I could do, and it saved no end of row and bother, as you must allow. You are very wrong to quarrel with Stephen about it. When a woman is married, she ought to stick to her husband; it is very bad taste of you to leave him. Ta, ta! I don’t think you will see me next vac. I’m going to Ireland with a friend. Sorry to hear the guv’nor is so ailing.—
Yours affectionately,
FRED.”

Upon a nature so encased in selfishness as this, there was evidently but little impression to be made.

Another incident happened to me after my return to Follerton, that pained and grieved me unspeakably. Almost as soon as I was at home, I wrote to Mrs Hardcastle telling her, in as few words as I could, that a sad estrangement had parted me, only for a time I hoped, from my husband, and entreating her to tell me where he was, and to send me his address, that I might write to him. But, after a few days, my own letter came back to me unopened, and re-directed in the old lady's handwriting.

In my kind old friend's estimation, then, I had evidently sunk so low that she would have nothing more to do with me. I do not think I had realised all then what a terrible position was mine. I was neither wife nor widow, and yet I was something of both; and there rose up within me a cry of rebellion against my fate, and a gush of indignation against the husband who had so taken his life, and my own with it, into his own hands, as to deem it his duty to desert me. And in the eyes of the world it was *I* who was to blame.

It is always the woman who suffers in such cases; be she ever so pure, ever so blameless, ever so sinned against, there will never be wanting voices to say of her who lives apart from her husband, "It is *her* fault; there is something worse about her than is

openly spoken of. Her husband, poor fellow! could not live with her." That is what I *felt*, rather than knew, was being said of myself. When I thought of it, my shame and humiliation seemed greater than I could bear. And there was always that meeting hanging over my head, that meeting with the lover to whom I had not been true.

It came at last.

The evening was grey and lowering, great banks of cloud racked wildly across the heavens, the wind soughed moaningly among the bare branches of the trees, or swirled in gusty eddies among the old chimney stalks. It was February, and already the chill of the winter was over, and the air was damp and enervating. It was almost dark; I had just come in from a long solitary ramble over the wet grass of the park. I had left the hall-door open behind me, and was kneeling down before the stove, holding up the wet skirt of my dress to dry against the fire. Upstairs, I could hear Mrs Butt talking to my father in his bedroom; he had not left it to-day, and she had been taking up his early dinner to him.

I stooped over the fireplace with my back to the door, and presently some intuition by which one feels without seeing that one is no longer alone, made me aware that some one stood behind me.

I turned sharply round and saw him. I rose to

my feet with a smothered cry, and before I had time to utter a single word, he had caught me wildly to his heart and covered my face with passionate kisses.

I tore myself tremblingly away from his arms; there was no rapture to me in that embrace, only a terrible sense of horror and dismay.

I was another man's wife, and he did not know it. There was a lamp in the drawing-room. I drew him gently into the room.

"Come in here," I said, and we came out of the semi-darkness into the light.

"Oh, my darling!" he cried joyfully, holding me at arms'-length that he might look at me, "this moment repays me for all that I have suffered. Sometimes I have thought that I should never see your dear face again,—never hold you to my heart, nor kiss your sweet lips again. It seems almost too great a happiness to have reached you at last, to find you here where I left you. Do you remember, Maggie, how you told me you would be here, waiting for me still, and true to me? Have you nothing to say to me, my love? Have I frightened you, that you look so white and scared? Have you suffered very much, dearest, on my account? You are thin, darling! You have been fretting yourself about me. I hear they all thought I had been murdered, at home, and I think it was

the worst part of my misery to think that *you* would hear it, for I knew how terribly it would make you suffer. But you soon heard I was safe, did you not? And now I am back, I will never leave you again, darling. We will soon forget all this wretchedness—we are going to be so happy at last.”

“Oh, Frank! Frank!” I groaned, striving vainly to stem the current of his words.

He was so excited, and so full of delight, that he seemed hardly conscious of the stupefaction with which I listened to his rapid words of mingled joy and explanation.

How was I to tell him? How was I to quench this fever of happiness, in the awful reality of which he was so utterly ignorant? Now that I could see him plainly, he was frightfully altered; his cheeks were wan and sunken, his eyes hollow and haggard. There was a great red gash down one side of his face, and his hair was plentifully sprinkled over with grey.

I looked up into his face with horror-struck pity. How terribly he must have suffered! And how was I to say the words that were to crush out the hopes of his life for ever? Oh, how was I to say them! A sense of utter helplessness and incapacity kept me spellbound. I could not speak a word, only I kept my left hand instinctively hidden behind my back.

Frank seemed so taken up with his own happy anticipations that he could not see my agitation. My back was to the light which shone full upon his face, whilst mine was in the shadow ; perhaps he did not see the blank dismay with which I must have looked up at him.

“ Yes, darling ! ” he continued, gaily and excitedly, unheeding my continued silence, and keeping his hands one upon each of my shoulders ; “ we are to have no more trouble and sorrow now,—nothing but happiness, for a great piece of luck has happened to me. Only think, an old uncle of my mother’s has died and left me his whole fortune ; I cannot think why, for I never saw the old gentleman in the whole course of my life. All honour be to his blessed memory, though ! This was the news that met me when I landed at Southampton yesterday. The only tiresome thing about it is, that I have to take the worthy old buffer’s most excellent name, which is a great bore ; but, however, as it was my mother’s maiden name, I don’t object to it so much as if it were a stranger’s, and I daresay you won’t mind. Is it not glorious news, Maggie ? for we can be married at once, you see, as soon as ever you can get your toggery together, and then—”

“ Oh, Frank ! for pity’s sake stop ! ” I cried wildly. To hear him go on like this was more than I could bear—it was maddening !

"Why, what is the matter, Madge?" he said, a little anxiously; "did I startle you too much by coming in so suddenly? or is it that I look such a horribly ugly object, with this great wound in my face, that you would rather have nothing more to say to me? What is it, Madge? Why, you are quite pale and trembling. Are you not going to speak to me, darling? Come here, and lay your dear head on my shoulder once more, and tell me that you are glad to see me!"

But I shrank shudderingly away from him. He made a step or two after me, and caught hold of my hands.

"Frank!" I faltered, looking at him piteously, "there is something dreadful,—something I have to tell you."

"What dreadful thing can there be, love, since we are together again? Are you going to tell me that you have lost your money? If so, I have enough for both now. Is that what you are going to tell me?"

"Oh, no!"

"Or have you ceased to love me?"

"No," I murmured almost inaudibly, for his affection seemed to have renewed my own in all its intensity.

"Well, then, there can be nothing that signifies much, dearest," he replied re-assuringly. "Come

and kiss me, darling, and let us put off all lesser evils to be discussed to-morrow."

He drew me close to him, but suddenly his eye fell upon my left hand, that was clasped tight within his own. There upon my finger was the fatal circlet that had parted us for ever—the only ring I wore upon either hand.

"What is *this*?" he gasped, catching roughly at my hand.

I could not speak.

"Ah!" he cried, fiercely and wildly, dashing it away from him as though its contact burnt him, "I see it now—it is your wedding-ring—and you are false to me!"

I shall never forget the storm of rage and indignation that burst from his lips. Had I been the basest and the vilest of women, he could not have upbraided and reproached me more. Perhaps I deserved it at his hands, for I had not kept my troth to him; but he might have been merciful. When I told him tremblingly how my father had urged me to save him from beggary; how my brother had deceived and cheated me; how fate itself had been against me; how I had wept and wailed in vain over his silence; and how even now I was paying the bitter penalty for my marriage, by my lonely and deserted life—though not even to Frank could I speak of my husband's duplicity—

when I told him all this, he might at least have pitied me. But he had no pity, he was only furiously, frantically angry with me. Vaguely I felt that the man who loved me would have been less harsh to me than the man whom I had loved.

"You could never have loved me!" he cried; 'you tricked and cheated me and played with my love from the first!"

"Oh, Frank! you are unjust!" I said, through my tears.

"And you are like the rest of your sex, false and fickle, and utterly hateful. May God punish you as you deserve!" and then he turned from me, white with anger, and went away alone into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XX. *OF NEW YORK.*

HOW WE LIVED AT DENVER.

"Far from the madding crowd."—*Gray.*

MORE than two years have passed away since Frank Warner turned his back for ever upon the red gables of Follerton Court. The scene has shifted—the curtain rises upon a fresh land, a land of great round-topped hills, clad almost to their summits with thick glades of chestnut and oak—a

land of brawling streams, richly brown with the peat bogs above whence they rise, and tumbling noisily down below amongst the boulders along their course—a land of deep ravines, fern carpeted and mysteriously shaded in from the light of heaven—a land fair and lovely to look upon, but difficult of access by reason of its steep hills, and its almost impassable carriage roads.

In such a valley, deep in the heart of Devonshire, lies nestling far down amongst the hills, a long, low, stone house, whose walls in this bright summer time are thickly clad with jessamine and clusters of creamy roses. Behind it a small park studded with clumps of fine trees, sloping gradually upwards, till it melts, as it were, into the thick woods above; to the left a tiny red-roofed village and a grey church spire amongst the trees; to the right a long winding white road, stretching away northwards round the shoulder of the hill. Before the house is a smooth, flat, velvety lawn set in a bright framework of gay flower borders, and shaded here and there by broad spreading lime trees, or graceful deodaras whose feathery boughs sweep the grass at their feet. Up and down the broad expanse of greenery toils a fat little donkey dragging a mowing-machine, and a couple of white terriers are tumbling over each other in the sunshine.

Stay, there is one more feature of Denver House

that is worthy of record. In these Devonshire solitudes we are at least eight miles from a station, but not so far from the railway. The line passes within a mile of us. As you stand at the southern corner of the house, there between that break in the trees you can just see the gleam of the iron rails as they glitter in the sun, and every now and then there is a rush and a rumble, and a sullen roar as the trains come suddenly dashing out of the tunnel of one side, whizz merrily across the half mile of narrow valley, and plunge again, with wild, eerie screams into the unfathomable depths of the tunnel on the other side. That is all we ever see or hear at Denver of the great world beyond our own tree-clad valleys. And now it is time that I should define clearly who and what are the "we" who inhabit Denver House. We are a household consisting of three women, and who we are, and how we came to be located there, I will now proceed to set forth.

To begin with, Denver, a small but compact estate, consisting of house, park, and village, and sundry farms and tenements lying higher up the valley, is the sole possession and property of Miss Nina Thirlwall, who inherited it at the death of her mother. It is she, be it understood, who is in reality the mistress amongst us, but she is not yet twenty-one, and I, Margaret Hardcastle, am her

guardian, so left by the will of the afore-mentioned late Mrs Thirlwall.

When, at that lady's death, I came to remember what had been the nature of my promise to her concerning her daughter, and what were the relations which we were in future to hold towards each other, it became a question whether Nina should live with me at Follerton, or whether I should go to her at Denver. Several powerful reasons induced me to select the latter alternative.

To begin with, my father was dead, and Follerton, as I well knew, had become my husband's absolute property. It might be that he would desire to live there, and yet would refrain from doing so, from a reluctance to turn me out. I said to myself proudly that I would not be a clog upon his movements, neither would I, by remaining in his house, seem to invite him to return to me. If he ever returned, it should be because of his love, and for no ulterior cause of convenience or expediency. And then my old home had become hateful to me; there were so many painful scenes, so many sad memories connected with it, so much that served to keep alive the many sorrows and bitter heartburnings of my unhappy life, that I ardently longed to leave it, and to begin a fresh existence, in new scenes and with new associations.

So it came to pass that I transferred myself and

my household gods to the "sleepy hollow," as I loved to call it, among the Devonshire hills, and went to live with Nina Thirlwall.

At first we two young women lived there alone in peace and harmony, but also in great seclusion, for the deep mourning which we were both of us wearing for our parents, prevented us from mixing in any way with our country neighbours. By degrees, however, Nina began to fret for a little more society, and for all the simple pleasures which, at her age, it is so natural to love and enjoy. And then it was that I began to feel how totally unequal I was for the cares and duties of a chaperon.

I shrank almost morbidly from seeing strangers, and from mixing in any scene of pleasure or dissipation, however mild and unpretentious. I could not be gay or light-hearted. I could not shake off the unspoken gloom that oppressed me by day and by night with an ever-increasing sadness. It did not seem to me to be right that I should go about and make merry as though my life were like other people's, for was I not a deserted wife,—a woman whose conduct could be questioned, and wondered over, and speculated upon? And how could I then cast a shadow over Nina's bright young life by appearing perpetually at her side? To do so would have been to draw her into the darkness which enveloped my own life.

And thus it was that Mrs Temple appeared upon the scene, and made up the feminine trio which inhabited Denver House.

Mrs Temple was a widow in very poor circumstances, a distant relation of Nina's upon her father's side, in virtue of which she was in the habit of introducing her as "My cousin."

She was very thankful to come and live at Denver in the character of our housekeeper, to which was soon added the more agreeable duty of acting as Nina's chaperon. She saved us from a great deal of trouble,—she ordered dinner, added up the week's bills, scolded the servants, and bustled about the house from morning till night as happy and as busy as she could be, whilst we two idle young women sat on the lawn or dawdled over our piano or our books together.

She was a stout and most respectable-looking old lady, and she looked quite handsome in the black moire antique which I presented to her, and attired in which, and in a marvellous erection of black lace and feathers which she herself had concocted, she looked a very dragon of fierceness and propriety, quite fitted to look after a whole regiment of young heiresses.

It became an understood thing that Mrs Temple was the one to be always invited to go out with Nina, and that Mrs Hardcastle went nowhere.

Nina used to tell people who were curious upon the subject, that I was delicate, and found late hours trying to me, and if some acquaintance more inquisitive than others wondered why I did not, at all events, accept invitations to afternoon parties, or speculated upon the oddness of a young woman of two-and-twenty shutting herself up like a nun, Nina would say shortly that I did not care for society.

"Your friend is a widow?" one lady asked her on one occasion.

"She has lost her husband in a very sad way," was Nina's discreet reply.

"Ah, really! but I have never seen her wear a widow's cap."

"They are ugly things," answered Nina carelessly. "I should not like her to wear one. Surely one can do as one likes about such trifles as dress."

So it came to be generally believed in the neighbourhood that I was a widow. I felt that for Nina's sake it would be better to allow the supposition to be credited. So I stayed at home, and Nina went out with Mrs Temple, and told me all about it when she came back.

But when the third summer of our life together came round, my ward made a most piteous appeal to me that I would consent to the holding of a lawn-tennis party at home.

She must do some little thing, she said, to return the civility of her neighbours—would I object so very much to a garden party ?

“I need not appear, Nina. You can ask anybody you like ; I will stay in my own room.”

“Oh, Maggie, as if I could allow that ! Surely, dear, it would do you good to see a few people now and then. No, dearest, don't think I don't understand why it is. I know that you are unhappy still about your husband, although you will never talk to me about it, but it would make *me* so much happier if you were sometimes with me in society. Oh yes, ever so much !”

She was kneeling before my chair with her bright, pretty face looking up entreatingly into mine. I stroked her soft brown hair, and kissed her smooth cheek fondly.

“Would it make you happier, Nina ? Tell me why.”

And then she looked down, and played with the fringe of my dress : there was a heightened glow upon her downcast face.

“What ! lovers already ?” I said playfully ; but I could not wonder at it, she was so pretty and so bright. “It shall be as you wish,” I answered, kissing her. “We will have a garden party, and I will be introduced to your friends.”

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW WE GIVE A GARDEN PARTY.

"This bud of love
May prove a beauteous flower."
Shakespeare.

"WHO is he, Nina?"

We are standing side by side upon the lawn superintending the laying out of the tennis courts. Nina has been flying about excitedly all the morning, from one end of the garden to the other, ordering, directing, scolding, and contradicting herself every other minute: she is quite out of breath now with her exertions. Within the house, Mrs Temple is equally busy in marshalling about the indoor servants, who are laying out a long table, covered with a cold repast, in the dining-room; we can see the glitter of silver dishes and the gleam of the cut flowers in rich pyramids of colour, and we can smell the cool scent of the melons and the peaches down the centre of the table.

It is the day of our garden party.

Nina is standing for one instant by my side surveying her handiwork, or rather that of the two gardeners, who are toiling at her bidding. She looks very pretty in her white flannel suit, relieved with pale blue, with a little white and blue cap to match, set coquettishly on the side of her head.

I repeated the question.

"Who is he? Considering that you may not marry till you are twenty-one without my permission, you might as well tell me his name?"

"Good heavens, Maggie! who ever talked about marrying?" cried Nina, blushing like a rose.

"Still there is something—"

"I never said he wanted to marry me; or even if he did," with a little toss of her head, "I am not at all anxious to marry anybody! I suppose one may like a person, without—"

"You tiresome child, you know very well what I mean,—is he coming to-day?"

"If you mean Mr Powell, I am sure I have not the least idea whether he is coming or no. That net isn't half stretched, Thomas, and the court is at least six inches out of the straight line," and away she ran to the further side of the lawn.

So his name was Powell. I had guessed for some weeks that a new influence had crept into my child's life, but I had been unwilling to force her confidence; I only wanted to know his name, that I might judge of him for myself when I saw him. He had been staying with some people called Davidson, who lived some way from us, about twelve miles off, where Nina had been to spend a few days, a week or two ago. Ever since that visit, Nina had been altered; she had been at times

dreamy, silent, self-absorbed—at times full of excitement and merriment. Once indeed I had found her in tears.

All this had made me anxious, for I loved her dearly, and I was in a measure responsible for her happiness; and if there was one thing above all others that I was determined about, it was that she should not wreck her life as I had wrecked mine.

I wanted to see this Mr Powell for myself; if he only wanted her for her money, he should not have my darling, of that I was well persuaded.

Nina had had another lover, no other than my own brother. Fred was a smooth-faced young curate now, with a self-satisfied smile, and a self-conceited manner; and last Christmas he had come down on a visit to Denver House. Before he had been with us three days, I had fathomed his inducement in coming to see us; his love-making was too audaciously rapid and exaggerated to be due to anything but the most mercenary of motives. Fortunately, Nina had not been impressed by him, handsome and smooth-tongued as he was; she had laughed at him, kindly, it is true, because he was my brother, but very unmistakably, and Fred had taken the hint, and had departed crestfallen, much to my relief and comfort.

I had got out of that trouble well, and now here was another lover upon the scene!

I wandered slowly up and down the lawn musing upon the perplexities and embarrassments caused by marriageable young women to their friends and relatives, until I was aroused from my reverie by a cry from Nina, that the company was beginning to arrive, in the shape of a basket pony-carriage coming up the drive.

Very soon our lawn presented an animated and unwonted appearance ; a gay crowd scattered itself over its green slopes, and under its shady trees, and four games of lawn tennis were presently in full swing. There were girls in many-coloured dresses, scarlet and blue and green—girls who flung themselves about ungracefully, and got hot and blowsy-looking, and girls who wielded their rackets easily, and moved swiftly and yet quietly, as Nina did, looking cool and fresh and sweet to the end of the day.

The men were chiefly clergymen—young curates and old rectors, with here and there a long-legged youth of eighteen, who was preparing for the army, or at home from the universities, for there is a scarcity of men at Denver,—where, indeed, is the country neighbourhood where they are plentiful ?—and if it were not for the curates, what would country young ladies do ?

Besides the players there were a considerable number of idlers ; mothers, who sipped their tea

under the trees, and talked over their babies or their servants; elderly young ladies, who, not being very ornamental, had not been asked to join in the game, and who therefore said they did not care about it, and wandered about the grounds instead; old gentlemen, who congregated together over politics, or parish matters; and not a few children, who found their way to the kitchen-garden, and committed all sorts of depredations there amongst the gooseberries and the strawberry beds.

Amongst all these different groups I moved about for some time, shaking hands and doing my best to be entertaining, as it was clearly my duty to be. I am not quite sure that they all knew who I was. Mrs Temple they greeted familiarly; they knew her well, her portly figure and good-tempered face had been welcomed often at their houses. But who was the pale woman in mourning, with the sad face and the serious eyes, who kept moving slowly from one to the other with quiet smiles and gentle words? I overheard more than one question of the kind follow me as I went.

"Oh, don't you know?" said one; "it is the widow lady who lives with Miss Thirlwall; she is her guardian."

"I thought Mrs Temple was her guardian."

"Oh, no,—only an old governess. I believe Mrs Hardcastle is her guardian."

"Dear me, she looks a girl herself."

"Yes, poor thing, she is quite young; she never goes anywhere;—some sad story about the husband, I believe."

I moved away from the sound of their compassionate voices, feeling lonely and miserable, and came suddenly face to face with Nina.

"Well, Nina?"

"Oh, Maggie, the Davidsons have just come!"

The girl's face was a picture of misery.

"And Mr Powell not with them?"

She shook her head, and the tears rushed into her eyes.

— "Don't make a little goose of yourself, child," I said. "Which is Mrs Davidson? The fat woman in green, isn't it?—just coming out from the house. Come with me."

I took her hand, and we went forward together, and greeted Mrs Davidson and her two daughters.

"Surely your daughters are not all here?" I asked. "You have a third, have you not?"

"Oh yes, she is coming by-and-by. She does not play tennis, you know, Miss Thirlwall, so she thought she would ride over later with Mr Powell. I thought I might venture to bring him, as you kindly asked me to bring any one I liked."

"We shall be very pleased to see him," replied Nina demurely, but her face was beaming with

smiles when she carried the Miss Davidsons off towards the players.

"One ought not to bring people who don't play tennis," said Mrs Davidson apologetically to me. "I think a man who doesn't play is now-a-days a real infliction in a country house; but this poor fellow has injured his right arm in some way some years ago—abroad, I think, it was—and he cannot use it well,—not well enough to hit a ball, that is to say. I hope Miss Thirlwall does not mind his coming; she met him at my house when she stayed with us."

I hastened to assure her that we should be very glad to see him, and that we were not such desperate players at Denver as to value a guest solely in proportion to his capabilities for lawn-tennis.

Mrs Davidson moved away to greet some of her friends under the lime trees, and I wandered off by myself into the shrubbery in the opposite direction.

I sat down on a bench closely sheltered under the drooping boughs of the trees above it. Here I could watch the gay scene without being noticed. I could see the light figures of the girls, and the somewhat shambling gestures of the men, as they struck or missed their balls, and I could hear their merry cries of mock dismay or of playful triumph, according to the chances and changes of the game. Then beyond was the group of lookers-on under

the trees, sipping their tea and chatting together. I could hear the hum of their voices from where I sat. I felt very sad and unhappy. It seemed hard to be left alone, as it were, stranded on the bank, whilst the stream of life flowed past me. Other people's lives seemed full of interest and vitality—mine was over! And I was young still, little more than a girl. I could have enjoyed myself and laughed and shouted like the rest, had I been only free—free from the shadow that hung over me. I could not analyse my own feelings; I scarcely knew what ailed me. Only there was always that dull aching at my heart,—that unsatisfied longing in my soul, that embittered my whole existence. What was it, I wondered, that troubled me? Was it the memory of Frank Warner, or was it the misery of being parted so hopelessly from my husband? I could not tell, only I felt vaguely that one thing alone could make life smooth for me again—the presence of my husband.

I had been sitting still for some time, I knew not how long, whilst these thoughts revolved sadly through my mind—were they not always with me more or less?—when all at once I became aware of footsteps behind me along the shrubbery path. I felt I could not speak to any one just now, the tears were too near my eyes. I shrunk farther back into my bower of greenery, trusting that they

would pass by me without seeing me. The next minute I caught a glimpse of Nina's white dress through the trees, and I perceived that she was not alone,—a man was with her. They came close to where I sat, neither of them apparently speaking, then they stood still. The man stood with his back to me, and there were trees and shrubs between us, so that I could not well see him. Nina's face, downcast and rosy, was turned towards me, and then the man spoke.

"Will you not speak, Nina?" he asked her softly.

My heart beat violently, and I half rose from my seat, for I recognised the voice of the speaker!

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW FRANK RE-APPEARS.

"*Lover to listening maid.*"—*Bryant.*

FOR some minutes the tumultuous beating of my heart, and a bewildering singing sound in my ears, prevented me from hearing what they said. I had sunk down pale and trembling again upon my bench.

When I recovered somewhat, Nina was speaking.

"You must really go?" she was asking, her eyes raised timidly to her companion's face, and

there was a world of trouble in their azure depths. "But you will come back soon?"

"No, I shall not come back," answered the voice of the man who had once been dear to me. "What is the use? I should find you surrounded by lovers, Miss Thirlwall. I do not care to find myself forgotten."

"You called me Nina just now," she said, nearly in tears. "And why do you suppose I should be so fickle, so—so faithless?"

"Because women all are," he answered, laughing harshly—"they are all false. Yes, I mean what I say—you with your sweet voice, and those innocent-looking baby eyes, that have made a fool of me once more—you are no better than the rest."

She turned away angrily, but he caught her hand and made her listen to him.

"No, you shall hear me out," he said, almost savagely. "I don't suppose you mean it now, now that I am near you, holding you by the hand, talking to you; you like me well enough now, I dare say, or you think you do; but if you were to be left alone; if I were to go away to-day and leave you as you suggest for a year, till you are of age, and your own mistress, how long do you suppose your constancy would last? Why the first good-looking man that you came across would make you forget all about me."

"If you think no better of me than that—" cried Nina, in a voice broken with tears.

He turned to her and caught her hands.

"Oh! poor little Nina!" he exclaimed repentantly. "What a brute I am to you! Now I have made you cry. My poor little darling, what a mistake you have made in caring for me!"

She nestled up close to him, resting her head with a mute, caressing action against his arm.

"There, that is better, child, I can't bear to see you cry; but you know it is my misfortune that I never can believe in a woman. I am soured, I suppose. I had such a terrible lesson once, it seems to me that I can never trust any one of your sex again; the sweeter, and gentler, and prettier they are, the more likely it seems that they will betray the man whom they profess to love."

"You never can have known a *good* woman, or you would not speak like that!" cried Nina indignantly.

"I don't know; she *seemed* good enough. She looked at me with steadfast, loving eyes like yours—only hers were grey, not forget-me-not blue, as yours are; and she rested her head against my shoulder, much as yours rests now, child, only hers was dark, and soft, and wavy, and yours is smooth and bright, like a dash of sunshine." He was stroking the head that leant against him fondly as he spoke.

"Tell me about her," she whispered, looking up at him; "only—oh! Frank, don't tell me *too much* about your loving her. I could not bear it!"

He smiled, and bent down and kissed her.

"Poor little jealous girl!" he said fondly. "Well, I will tell you about her; it is not a very long story."

There was a moment's pause. The sound of voices and laughter came up from the lawn, faint and distant. No one could see us where we were—the lovers under the shadow of the drooping branches of the beech tree, and I cowering speechless in my corner behind them. I sat rooted to the spot. No thought of whether I ought not to go and leave them alone entered my mind; no idea of whether it was not dishonourable to listen to what he was going to say to her troubled me. I only knew that the story of *my* falseness, of *my* infidelity was to be told her,—that I should hear from his lips what he had thought of me, and that her mind would be poisoned against me,—that Nina, the one creature I had on earth to love me, would be taught to hate and despise me. Did he know that I lived with her? Was there yet a chance that she might escape the knowledge of who and what was this woman who in the old days had blasted his life?

For a few minutes I had been absolutely bewild-

ered by the discovery that it was Frank Warner who was Nina's lover. How had she known him? Where had she met him? And who, then, was Mr Powell? But presently it came back to my recollection how he had told me that he had changed his name to that of the old man who had left him his heir. Powell then must be the name he had adopted, and that was how I came to be in ignorance of the vicinity of my old lover.

Mine no longer! Oh! with what a gush of relief and thankfulness I recognised this fact at all events. So many weary days, so many sleepless nights, I had had this man's face before me, haggard, pale, broken-hearted, as I had seen it last. How often I had wept in helpless penitence and despair over the thought of his suffering and misery on my account; how often my remorse and self-accusations had weighed upon me, a burden almost heavier than I could bear! And now I saw him again; his face was turned towards me; I recognised the deep gash upon his cheek, and the lines which pain and suspense had scored upon his sun-burnt face; but his whole expression had changed, as he looked down into Nina's upturned face.

I could see by the tender look in his clear brown eyes that he loved her; and I swore to myself that I would give to him the only reparation that lay in my power—I would give him Nina. It should

not be my fault if her love and her beauty did not make up to him for the bitter grief and disappointment which it had once been my hard lot to deal to him. If only he would speak kindly of me now: if only he would spare me to her!

Alas! my hope was vain. I stilled my own agitated thoughts to listen to what he was now saying.

"It is not a long story, Nina, but I suppose it is a common one. Out of sight out of mind is the rule with your sex, is it not? Ah! you shake your head, you don't believe me; but you have never been tried, child. Well, this girl, she was as young as you are, and like you she had never loved before—she *said* so, and I was a young fool and believed her. We were parted very soon. I was in the navy then, and I had to go to sea. I asked her before I left to be true to me for three years—I hoped to be at home again then. And she promised to wait for me,—to be true to me; she looked up at me, yes, as you are looking now: heaven's own truth was written in her lovely eyes. It would have been a sacrilege to have doubted her—three—thirteen—thirty years, you would have thought to have heard her, that it was all the same to her how long it was, so earnestly did she assure me of her undying affection, so devoutly did she plight me her faith.

"Shall I tell you how it ended? An unexpected event brought me home in less than six months. You have heard from the Davidsons, I daresay, how I was taken prisoner by some savages in the West Indies. I told you myself a little about it. Well, I suffered a great deal—but almost more in mind than in body; for I thought of my poor girl, and of how terrible the anxiety and the suspense would be for her. At last I was rescued, and came home. Full of joy and hope I landed in England, and hastened off to see her. I thought I would surprise her. I would not write to let her know of my coming; I would walk in quietly, and find her in her loneliness and sadness, and I would take her to my heart and comfort her for ever. What do you think I found? I found her well, and lovely as ever, with a handsome silk gown on her back and a wedding-ring on her finger."

"Married?" cried Nina breathlessly.

"Yes, married—in less than six months."

"Oh, but there must have been some horrible mistake!"

"No mistake at all; only that a rich man, old enough to be her father, had come forward, and I suppose she thought it a better speculation than waiting indefinitely for a poor beggar, wrecked upon a distant shore, who might never come back to claim her. That is woman's logic, Nina; and a

very sound, practical fashion of reasoning too, isn't it?" And he laughed harshly and bitterly.

"You love her still!" exclaimed Nina, suddenly and suspiciously, pushing him from her. The action and the words were truly feminine.

"I? Nina, don't be foolish! She sank out of my heart that day, at once and for ever. Only she has made me suspicious for ever after. Why, you silly child, come here again. Do you not believe that I love *you*, and only you? Can you not be satisfied because you are not my first love?"

She yielded only too gladly to his words and his caresses, letting him draw her once more fondly to his side.

"I do not believe you love me," she pouted, "because you will not do what I want. You talk of leaving me, sooner than of doing what I ask!"

His brow grew suddenly dark.

"I love you," he said; "but I do not believe in you. I will never believe in any woman's word—I cannot. It may be a madness, but it is an impossibility to me. I will not submit to be deceived a second time. If you love me indeed, you must prove it to me. If you will not submit to my test, then let me bid you good-bye, and leave you for ever!"

"You are cruel to me!" she cried, looking up at him despairingly. "It is hard that I should suffer

for the sins of that other woman, who was heartless and mercenary." I winced at her words. "It is not just of you to make a trial of my love."

"Is it not true wisdom? If you have not the courage to be mine in my way, would you have the courage to be true to me in your own way?"

"But what I ask of you is such a simple thing," she pleaded. "Only to go through the form of asking my guardian; it was my mother's dying wish that I should not marry till I was twenty-one, without her permission. You will not even speak to her, or know her, you say. Why not? She is here now; come and let me take you to her."

"I will have no guardians or relatives to stand between us," he interrupted angrily. "I don't want to know her. I have seen her: it is that old woman."

"Oh no, she is not old," said Nina.

But he never even heard her gentle interruption. It was evident that he thought Mrs Temple was her guardian; he had never heard of me.

"I will not submit myself to be criticised by any one but yourself. I will have no third person step in between us. You have no mother, no one to whom you can be in any way responsible; come to me of your free will, or not at all. I ask you to trust yourself to me; I tell you that I am well off,

that I am no fortune-hunter in search of your money. I give you no proof of this, I only ask you to believe it. Do not look so indignant; I know you do not suspect me of it."

Nina was wringing her hands in distress.

"Oh! if you would only take my promise, and let me wait a year. I should be of age, then, and need ask no one's leave. Do you not see, Frank, that I am bound by my promise to my poor mother? Why cannot you wait a year?"

"Because I do not believe you will be true to me," he answered, almost roughly. "Because I will not trust my life a second time to a girl's caprices. If you can sacrifice me to a sentimental notion of honour respecting a promise to your mother, which she herself, did she know the circumstances of the case, would probably be the first to absolve you from,—if you can sacrifice me so easily, then your love is a poor, weak, fine-weather thing, and not the love I want from you."

He was harsh to her. I wondered that she was not angry, that her spirit did not rise in proud rebellion against this strange and autocratic wooing. But where is the woman who does not love to be mastered? The man who is a woman's slave may indeed be loved by her, but in her heart she despises him. The man who is her master is worshipped, and Frank was Nina's master.

Her next words were spoken with all the humility and docility of an obedient child.

"What is it you want me to do?" she asked timidly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW NINA WAS TEMPTED.

"The woman that deliberates."—*Addison*.

I DO not know whether I was most filled with indignation or astonishment at the "test" of her love, to which Nina's lover proposed to submit her.

The plan that he proceeded to unfold to her was nothing more nor less than that she should consent to a runaway marriage. There was something almost ludicrous in the idea of a young lady of independent means, and with almost an unfettered will in the disposition of herself, running away with a man for no other reason save to prove to him that she loved him truly. Had I not known who and what was Frank Powell—for so I must now call him—I should have imputed to him the worst and most mercenary of motives.

As it was, it seemed to me that he had developed a vein of eccentricity which had completely wrapped his judgment and his common-sense. I was filled with amazement as I listened to the gradual un-

folding of his scheme. He was to go up to London that very night, and make all necessary preparations,—procure a licence, and arrange for a wedding at one of the City churches, and this day week he was to be in waiting at a little wayside inn about a mile from the house, where she was to join him at ten o'clock at night. He would have a dogcart ready, and drive her to the station; there was a night-train, by which they were to get up to town at four o'clock in the morning, and they would be married at ten o'clock.

Nina was to bring her maid with her, and to travel with her in one carriage. Frank would go alone in another. On reaching London she and the maid were to go straight into the railway hotel at the Paddington Terminus, and Frank himself would only join her at the church door. In this way, he argued, nobody's propriety would be outraged, and nothing of a compromising nature would be done.

I failed to agree with him. The escapade appeared to me in a totally different light. I was filled with horror at the idea of Nina's being subjected to such an ordeal, which, needless to say, I determined should never take place.

Nina herself seemed full of doubts and apprehensions.

"Could we not be married here, at home?" she asked, looking the picture of irresolution and distress.

"No, it is not very likely that would be allowed. Are you such a coward after all that you will not consent to trust yourself to me?"

"Oh no, it is not that indeed! But it seems such a wretched way of being married,—so much as if one was doing wrong—to slink away from home in that way."

"If you are afraid, do not come," he answered coldly, and almost scornfully. "Or is it the pomp and vanity of your wedding-clothes, the fuss and excitement of bridesmaids, and wedding-cake, and white satin favours that you are fretting after?"

"How unjust you are to me!" cried Nina, weeping.

And then he kissed her again, and comforted her.

"Must I decide now, this very minute?" she wailed.

"No, you need not decide till the last minute. Only remember that I shall be there, waiting for you, this day week. If you do not come I shall go away, that is all. I shall be there an hour before the time, waiting for you. If you love me with all your heart, you will come; if your love is a weak, frail thing not worth having, you will not come, and I shall go away alone. That is all."

It was the strangest love-making. Perhaps he thought so himself, for his next words were a sort of apology.

"I know it sounds a dreadful thing to you, you

poor little child ! but, you see, if you were not to do something of the sort to prove to me that your love is real, I should never believe in you. I have no faith in woman's promises, no reliance on woman's vows. Fancy how dreadful it would be to go through life always suspecting you of treachery and falseness, always believing that you were plotting against me, that you did not really care for me ! Should we not be miserable together ? ”

“ And will you trust me truly if I do this thing for you ? ” she asked hesitatingly.

“ Always implicitly,” he replied fervently.

She sighed.

“ Oh ! I will think of it, then,” she answered wearily. “ Don't speak of it any more now. A week longer ? Well, I will think of it the whole week. Perhaps—oh ! I don't know what to say to you, Frank.”

She looked up in his face in an agony of distress and indecision.

I think he was sorry for her, sorry for the dilemma in which he was placing her.

“ Say nothing just now,” he answered. “ Think it over, and if you find you cannot come to me, well, then I will go away, and try to forgive you. Women are neither brave nor faithful, I know.”

“ Don't say so ! ” she exclaimed earnestly.

“ Prove to me that they are,” he whispered, and

drew her to his heart, showering down passionate kisses upon her upturned face.

"I must go," she said breathlessly. "See! they are looking for me. I have been away too long."

"Then I will leave you here. I can go round to the stables and get my horse by the back way. Good-bye, darling! Remember that it rests with you to give me new life, new faith, new happiness, and to restore to me the peace of heart which that other woman has shattered."

He pressed her hand once more, and left her.

As he passed me his face looked full of hope and of triumph. I could see that he was sure of her. Poor, little, trembling, wavering child! He knew how absolute was his mastery over her, and, man-like, it was sweet to him to prove it. He was so near to my hiding-place, as he passed, that the branches that sheltered my cowering form brushed against me as he went by, and yet he never saw me, I who, as he said, had shattered the peace of his past life!

I sat for some minutes where they had left me, absorbed in my own thoughts. Then I rose slowly, and went into the house by a side door. By this time the guests were all assembled in the dining-room, where a cold repast, half dinner, half supper, had been laid out. After it was over, there was to be a dance in the drawing-room; the older guests would

probably not remain for it, prudently remembering the long drive home and the badness of the roads over the hills ; but all the younger people were full of excitement over the prospect of the finale to the entertainment, which was entirely an after-thought on the part of some of the more adventurous spirits among the guests.

I passed rapidly through the hall on the way upstairs. Through the open dining-room door I could see the gay party assembled round the long white table with its pyramids of roses down the centre, and covered with glittering glass and silver dishes, laden with good things. Mrs Temple had surpassed herself as a housekeeper—she was flying about, if such an expression can be used to denote the hasty movements of so portly a lady, hurrying from one guest to another, seeing that everybody was helped, handing the plates, scolding the servants, and evidently in the seventh heaven of delight, for these cares of “much serving” were very dear to the good lady’s soul.

Nina was there too. I fancied she looked pale and *distracte* amidst all the gay chatter around her,—that her smiles were forced and unnatural, and that she seemed preoccupied and but little interested in the talk that went on among her friends. My heart bled for her. I paused a moment at the doorway. Should I go in? No

one wanted me, no one would miss me. I yielded to the shrinking from society which was becoming a second nature to me, and crept softly upstairs to my own bedroom.

The window was wide open; the sky was all saffron and opal from the lingering light of the sunset; sprays of jessamine and honeysuckle upon the wall outside came peeping into my room, and waved gently to and fro in the soft evening breeze, and filling my chamber with a sweet and subtle odour. I sat down, and resting my arms upon the window-sill, looked upon the lovely world without.

What was I to do about Nina? what use was I to make of this knowledge concerning her love affairs, which I had thus surreptitiously obtained? Would she confide in me of her own free will? No, I did not think so. Nina was strangely reticent and reserved for so young a girl: she had a singular amount of self-control and self-reliance. Often it had struck me as strange that she had never questioned me concerning my past story. She had been with me in Paris when my husband had left me; it was she who had put his parting letter into my hands; and yet she had never by word or sign alluded to him in any way since we had lived together. It was the same with regard to herself: her own most sacred thoughts and emotions were hidden from me. I might, I am per-

suaded, have lived with her for months in the familiar intercourse of daily life without discovering how entirely and how recklessly she had given her heart away, if this chance opportunity had not made me an unintentional listener to the interview between her and Frank. This being so, I felt certain that no persuasions, no representations of mine would induce her to give up her lover, or to become his in any other manner than the way he had prescribed for her. I had no real right over her actions—a guardian has but a shallow hold at best; and when, as in this case, the guardian was so little older than the ward, it was not to be supposed that she would listen to me, or obey my suggestions, when they were so far opposed to the wishes of her own heart. She who could be so reserved and secretive would be also, I felt convinced, tenacious and inflexible in going her own way.

But did I wish to oppose her? did I wish her to give up her lover? No, a thousand times no! He loved her, and he would make her a good husband; why should I stand between them? Gladly and gratefully I perceived that the Frank Warner of my youth was nothing more to me. I must have ceased to love him long ago, so utterly free was my heart from the faintest pang of regret on my own account. With a deep thankfulness I acknowledged this fact to myself. It was clear to me—clear as

daylight—that Frank had nothing whatever to do with the shadow that hung over my heart; and now that I knew him to be grieving for me no more, to be sincerely in love with so charming a girl as Nina, I was unfeignedly glad. He should have his Nina, I said to myself, and he should receive her from my own hands—the hands that had shaken his faith in woman, and that owed him all the reparation in their power. But how was this to be done?

Had he not said he was going away that night I should have been tempted to seek him out in the morning, and entreat him myself to give up this cruel and unnecessary test of poor Nina's devotion and courage. But it was too late to do that.

But as to allowing her to go away by herself at night with him up to London, even with the maid—

And then suddenly there flashed into my mind a thought that was nothing less than an inspiration. I knew what I would do. Frank should carry out his love-test. Nina should be proved faithful and devoted, propriety should be maintained inviolate, and my duty to Mrs Thirlwall's child should be accomplished all at one and the same time!

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW MY SLUMBER IS DISTURBED.

"In danger's troubled night."—*Campbell.*

It grew darker and darker; the orange and gold lights all died out of the sky; a veil, first of pale, misty blue, but deepening by degrees into a deep, sombre indigo curtain, spread itself over the face of the heavens; the stars crept out one by one; the hills looked low and shadowy in the uncertain light; and far away to the west the crescent moon arose faintly over the tree tops. Away in the valley the nine o'clock express train rushed noisily across on its way to London, leaving a long line of smoke behind it, which the moonbeams caught and turned into silver, and then dashed again into the darkness of the tunnel beyond. It was the train that was carrying Frank up to town.

Presently I heard a great commotion in the house below. The guests were going out from the dining-room into the drawing-room. Their voices and laughter came floating up to where I sat in my solitude. Then somebody sat down to the piano, and struck up a quadrille, and the measured tramp of many feet beat time to it.

First a quadrille, then a waltz, then Lancers,

then another waltz, and still I sat on by the open window, looking out into the semi-darkness of the summer moonlight night, and breathing all the sweet fragrance of the cool flower-scented air.

My door opened softly, and some one came in.

"Oh, Maggie, why do you sit all by yourself up here? Why will you not come down and join us?"

Nina, in her white dress, sank down on her knees by my side, and cast her arms around me.

"It makes me so sad to think of you sitting alone all the evening. I am sorry—oh! I am very sorry—that I ever persuaded you to have this party! It seems nothing now but vexation and annoyance."

"Don't you think, then, that I have the best of it up here?" I asked, smiling, and stroking her golden hair fondly. "What has gone so wrong, darling? Is not everybody enjoying themselves?"

"Oh yes. I did not mean that. They are making a great noise. But you are not with me, and I am sick of it all. Oh! how I wish they would go away."

"You very hospitable young person!" I said, laughing at her; and then there was a moment's silence, and her head lay silently on my shoulder. Presently I put up my hand to her face. It was wet with tears.

"Nina, my darling child, what is the matter?"

"You are crying!" I exclaimed, in feigned surprise, though of course I knew well enough what ailed her.

"Oh! it is nothing," she said, hastily wiping away her tears; "only I am tired, and weak, and foolish to-night. Maggie, did you ever feel as if you stood at the crisis of your fate, as if one false step would ruin your life, and as if you were being dragged along against your will by something stronger than yourself, something that was egging you on and on against your reason and your judgment?"

"Yes, I have felt like that," I answered slowly and all my past life came back to me—the old days at Follerton, when fate was too strong for me, when I felt helpless and storm-tossed upon a sea of doubt and uncertainty, not knowing where to turn, and when I had taken that false step along the path of life which had cost me so dear ever since.

"Yes," I said again, "I have felt it, poor child—poor child!"

I was so sorry for her, but then I held the key of her fate; I meant to guide her steps for her; she should not be helpless as I had been.

"Well, I feel so to-night. It is all nonsense, of course," she went on, with a little nervous laugh at herself. "I shall be all right in the morning, I daresay. I am upset and foolish to-night, and, oh! I do so wish these dreadful people would go."

"They will go soon, I daresay; see, there is one carriage coming round from the stables. Go down to your guests, you foolish child, and wish them good-bye properly, then come up again to me when they are all gone."

She went, and I waited for her patiently at my open window. In less than twenty minutes they had all departed. From my point of observation I watched them all go; I saw the ladies wrap themselves up in their thick shawls, and the men encase themselves in greatcoats and rugs, for most of them were in open carriages, and many of them had far to go.

"Good-night!—good-night!" cried the voices. "We have had such a charming evening—do give another party soon, Miss Thirlwall! There hasn't been such a successful one anywhere this summer—it has been delightful!"

And Nina, on the doorstep, was saying mechanically to them each,—

"So glad you have enjoyed it. Very kind of you to come." Little conventional phrases that had no depth and no meaning, whilst her heart all the time was away with her lover in the London express.

Presently they were all gone, and the house was quiet and empty once more, and Nina came back to me.

We sat up very late that night, talking, as women will when they are alone together, of every subject under the sun. Mrs Temple had wished us good-night yawningly and left us together, declaring herself to be absolutely knocked up with her exertions; and no wonder, poor woman, for she had toiled incessantly the whole day.

So Nina and I talked; she spoke of her mother, of her childhood and early youth, of her affection for Denver, of what she would do to the place by-and-by, of the improvements to the cottages, the restoration of the church, a little of her love for me, and the happiness of our life together; but nothing, not one single word of what I knew her heart must be fullest of.

"It is getting late, my child," I said at last, "and you will have no roses at all to-morrow."

"What does that matter, there is nobody to see me!" and she sighed.

"Nevertheless I shall send you to bed."

"Maggie," she said suddenly, "would you ever forgive me if I did something very wrong?"

"It depends what the wrong thing was!"

"Does it? Oh! if you were to do *anything* I should forgive *you*! But if I were to deceive you, to be ungrateful and headstrong, to do something I know you would disapprove of, could you forgive me if you knew that all the time I had loved you

very dearly, and would not have done it if I could have helped?"

"What is this chimerical sin against me you are inventing? or have you really done something dreadful?"

"Oh! no—no. I am only foolish. Maggie, why do you smile so much this evening? It is as if you knew of something that made you happy. I have a theory about you."

"What is it — about my smiling, do you mean?"

"Yes; I wonder if you would mind my telling you? Will you be angry?"

"Angry! Why should I be angry? No, of course not."

"Are you sure? Then I will tell you. Do you know, Maggie, I think you have heard something to-day."

I coloured a little. Did she know that I had discovered her secret? Her next words reassured me; they were very different from what I had expected.

"I think you have heard something about your husband, and that is why you smile so happily to yourself."

My eyes filled with sudden tears.

"No, I have not heard anything," I answered, in a low voice.

"Poor Maggie!" she whispered softly, kissing me, and then she rose and left me alone.

When she was gone I got up slowly, and began my preparations for bed. No, I had heard nothing of him—nothing. But was there not a something to-night in which I was an altered woman; something that made me, as she said, smile happily to myself. Was it only because I could see my way to making Nina the wife of my old lover; or was it not because all that had stood between me and my husband's love was cleared away for ever?

Why was it that in my troubled dreams that night I seemed to see Stephen's face ever before me. He seemed to be standing by my bedside, sometimes stretching out his arms to me wildly, despairingly, sometimes standing looking down at me with the old loving smile upon his face which I remembered so well.

I awoke with a violent start. It was very early in the morning, but the grey daylight was already creeping in through the dainty curtains drawn lightly across my open windows. I became immediately aware that something external had awakened me; there was something going on in the world outside that had aroused me from my feverish slumbers. What was it? I lay still for a few minutes, and listened; outside I heard a distant

murmur, a confused sound of voices, of short cries even, coming up, as it seemed, from the little valley below the park.

I sprang out of bed, and hurried to the window, throwing open the curtains. I could see nothing plainly. The village lay rapt in silence, the great woods along the hill sides were motionless as the sky. Only down in the dip towards the railway I could see many lights moving rapidly backwards and forwards; and as I strained my eyes to see I seemed to distinguish a black, confused mass huddled up as it were—great heavens! against the railway bank! It was from there that the sounds which I had heard proceeded.

In an instant the whole horror of what it was burst upon me. There was an accident upon the line! I turned sick and cold with terror, and even then my first thought was of Nina. Thank God! the man she loved had passed safely to his destination hours ago.

The next minute Mrs Temple, arrayed in a wondrous costume, such as no mortal who had not seen it could have imagined, consisting of a scarlet flannel jacket, a short blue skirt, bare legs of ponderous dimensions, and a nightcap, whose strings floated wide behind her, burst tumultuously into my room.

“Oh! dear Mrs Hardcastle, you are up too.

There must be an accident on the railway. Oh ! what shall we do ? Can we not help ? ”

“ Yes, indeed, Mrs Temple. Ring the bell, and I will have John knocked up, and the waggonette shall be sent off at once. We can surely take in some wretched sufferer here. Let us dress quickly.”

In five minutes the whole household was roused, and the necessary orders were given. But before the waggonette could be despatched, a labouring man came running breathlessly up to the house with a message from our doctor, Mr Long. The message was sent to Mrs Temple, whom he had met oftener than Nina or myself on her errands of mercy to the sick in the village. It was simply,—

“ Mr Long’s compliments to Mrs Temple, and there has been a bad accident, and he is sending up a wounded gentleman on a hurdle, if she will take him in at Denver ; and he is to be got to bed, and the doctor will come as soon as he can.”

And before the words were well out of the man’s mouth, we could see a melancholy procession coming at a foot’s-pace up the avenue. It was the unfortunate man, who was being carried up to the house on a stretcher.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW MRS TEMPLE TURNS SICK NURSE.

"When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering angel thou!"—*W. Scott.*

It was at this juncture that Mrs Temple proved to us of what metal it was that she was made. Nina and I clung shudderingly to each other as that ghastly burden came ever nearer and nearer to the house up the drive; the maid-servants were huddled up on the landing almost in hysterics; the butler and the footman were standing helplessly below in the hall, looking at each other, and unable to make any further suggestion than the key of the cellar, which they had managed to produce between them as a refuge in most human emergencies.

Mrs Temple alone stood forth, strong, self-possessed, and calm, like a forest oak in a plantation of birch saplings. Arrayed in her grotesque costume, with small regard for appearances, or for the impression she might create upon the household, she stood up at the top of the staircase and harangued us all, marshalling everybody in their places.

"Thomas, don't stand shivering there like a baby! Unbar the shutters, and open the front door. That is right, Hall. I see you have got the cellar key. Go and get a bottle of brandy out at once, it is sure

to be wanted. As to you women folk, I am ashamed of you standing there doing nothing! Cook, go and get ready some boiling water. Jane, get some sheets aired at once. The poor gentleman must be put in the room at the top of the stairs, the blue room. It is nearer than the other spare rooms. Payne, you are a sensible woman. I shall want you to help me until the doctor comes. As to you other girls, you had better all go and get dressed properly. You won't be wanted at all yet. My dears," turning to us, "go back into your rooms. You can do no possible good. You are both young and inexperienced in nursing; but I have had plenty of practice, and Mrs Payne and I can do all that is necessary between us."

Payne was the upper housemaid, an elderly woman, who had lived with Nina's mother.

"Dear Mrs Temple, are you sure you are equal to it by yourself?"

"Equal to it?" she said grimly. "I should just think so! Don't you know that I have been through the accident ward of St Thomas' Hospital? Why, if you liked, I could amputate every one of your legs and arms all the way round."

This remarkably ghastly proposition sent everybody flying about their business in different directions, leaving Mrs Temple mistress of the situation.

She retired for a few minutes into her room in

order to slip on a dress, but soon returned to her post, still adorned with the nightcap, the strings of which, however, she had now tied in a large and bristling bow under her chin, and the stiff, starched frills standing out on each side of her chubby face, imparted to her a wild and ferocious appearance. She looked altogether not unlike a fierce pussy-cat.

By this time Nina and I had thankfully retired into our rooms; we were glad to feel that our presence was really not required, for we both felt a natural shrinking from the painful spectacle which this unfortunate man, thus thrown upon our charity, might very possibly present. I persuaded Nina to go back to bed; but I sat up myself awaiting the return of Mrs Temple, who had promised to come and report the state of things to me.

I heard the men bringing the unhappy man into the house, and the tramp of their heavy feet as they carried him upstairs. And I shuddered as I listened, for I expected to have heard him cry out or groan as he was borne past my door. But there was not a sound—all was silent as the grave.

A fresh terror filled me—was the poor man dead already? The ominous thought filled me with gloomy forebodings.

Presently I heard the doctor arrive, and go upstairs; the door of the blue-room was closed, and there was a very long silence. Then a bell was

rung, and I heard some of the servants hurrying along the passage. I recognised the voice of Payne, and I half opened my door as she passed.

"Oh! Payne, is the poor man dead?"

"No, ma'am," she whispered; "but he is very badly hurt, poor gentleman; he is quite unconscious."

"How dreadful! Can I not help you, Payne?"

"No, ma'am, I think not. Mr Long wants the brandy and some boiling water, and I've sent Jane to get some old linen for rags. I don't think you can do any good, ma'am. You should see Mrs Temple! She is wonderful—so quiet and calm, and not a nerve about her. Mr Long says she is as good as any trained nurse."

Payne went her way, and left me alone to reflect on the extreme and praiseworthy foresight of people who, like ourselves, live close to a railway where accidents are frequent, and who have selected for an inmate of their household a person who has had the unspeakable advantage of having walked the hospitals, with a view to nursing the wounded.

By this time it was broad daylight, and the sun was high up in the heavens. I could not go to bed again. I felt too anxious about this poor man. Who was he? I wondered. Had he a wife to come and nurse him, or children to mourn for him? What would their feelings be when they saw the account in the newspapers of the accident, and knew tha

he whom they loved so dearly was in the doomed train that had perished? but if he was unconscious, how were we to know where they lived, in order to telegraph to them? Would he die under our roof, and be carried forth from it again helpless as he was brought to it? Or would he recover and walk away well and strong again, blessing Mrs Temple for her care, and Heaven for his preservation? I lost myself in a maze of speculation on the subject. To sleep again was an impossibility. I dressed myself, and sat down in my room to wait for Mrs Temple's arrival.

She came at length, looking white and tired, with hollows round her eyes and lines upon her forehead, as if her head ached, as indeed it did, poor thing; her very cap frills were limp and draggled; she looked a very weak pussy indeed now.

"Oh! my dear," she cried, throwing up her hands, and sinking down on a chair by my side, "such a terrible accident to happen close to our doors, as it were; it has quite unnerved me. Five poor people have been killed, and about twenty wounded and maimed."

"How did it happen?"

"The engine ran off the line—the axle-tree broke, they think; but the engine-driver, poor man, was killed, so nobody can quite say, and it all seems confusion as yet. It was just outside the tunnel."

"I shall never look at the line again without thinking of it," I said shudderingly. "Where are the poor sufferers, Mrs Temple?"

"Two or three were taken in at the inn at the village, and one at the farm below the line, and one poor woman is at the rectory; the others, who were less hurt, have all been taken back to Exeter by a special engine with an invalid carriage."

"Tell me about this poor man; will he live?" I asked anxiously.

"He is quite unconscious still. Mr Long does not think any bones are broken; but he must have been in the front carriage, for he was found under the engine. He must have been thrown there by the shock. He has been terribly scalded by the steam. Mr Long fears that his sight, at all events, must be destroyed; and there may, of course, be internal injuries, but of course one cannot tell yet."

"How dreadful! Poor fellow! Is he a gentleman, did you say, Mrs Temple?"

"Yes, certainly I should say so by his general appearance, and by his clothes—such of them as are left to him, poor man; and his hands are as white as yours. He must have been a handsome man too; a man of about fifty, I should say."

"Oh! Mrs Temple, how are we to let his friends know?" I cried, with my mind filled with the possible anguish of some despairing wife or daughter.

"Ah! that is a bad business," she answered, shaking her head. "Mr Long has searched his pockets, but one side of his coat was completely charred and burned away, only a few blackened fragments remain; in the other pocket he found a small blue silk letter-case embroidered with white flowers, which looks like some lady's needlework. We hoped there would have been cards, or at least a letter, inside, but there was not a vestige of such a thing—not even a bill, or a memorandum of any kind, to trace him by; only, such a funny thing—at least I am sure I oughtn't to say it is *funny*, for there is not much fun about it—but it struck me as odd for a middle-aged man. What do you think was inside the case? Nothing but a little pale grey lady's glove—just a little old glove that had been worn, quite soiled and crumpled. Is it not a strange thing to find?"

The tears came into my eyes. What a touching record was the little grey glove, wrapped in its silken case, and kept so closely to the heart of this poor man, who was middle-aged, as Mrs Temple had said, yet who kept the romance of his youth fresh and pure before him! My theory of the sorrow-stricken wife and daughters vanished, to be replaced by one infinitely more interesting. The letter-case and the glove had assuredly belonged to the woman he had loved, and she was dead. My heart all went out in pity and compassion towards him.

"And he will lose his sight?"

"Mr Long fears it. And now, my dear, I shall lie down here and have an hour's sleep whilst Payne takes my place by his bedside; and then I must dress myself decently, I suppose, and take off my night-cap, though I am sure it is the most comfortable thing to wear on one's head in a sick-room. You shall order me a cup of tea when I wake, in an hour's time; and then I shall be quite fresh again, and ready to stop up for any time. Mr Long will come again at eleven o'clock, and perhaps he will call in another doctor, if he thinks the case requires it. Thanks, my dear; I am quite comfortable. Just pull the curtain a little more forward; there, that will do; and mind you bring my tea in an hour—not a minute later; and if Payne wants me she will ring the bell, and you will be sure to wake me. There, now I shall sleep like a top!"

I tucked the good lady up on the sofa in my room, and made her as comfortable as I could, and then left her to her well-earned repose.

For four successive nights did that most excellent and charitable woman sit up by the bedside of our unfortunate guest, and for four consecutive days she never left his room for more than an hour at a time; for he was very ill.

When he recovered his consciousness, it was only to pass into a state of violent fever, in which he lay

tossing in wild delirium for two whole days and nights. During that time his life was despaired of; but he must have had a splendid constitution, for he battled through it, and came out, weak as an infant, it is true, but still with his life in his hands, as it were.

The doctors, for he had two—another had been summoned from Exeter—pronounced that he would live; and we all offered up thanksgivings for the news as heartily as though he had belonged to every one of us.

Nina and I never saw him: Mrs Temple would not let us into the sick-room. We could do no good, she said; and the sight of the poor man, lying helpless and sightless upon his bed, would only be a painful shock to us. So we left our "stranger," as we got to call him, to the care of his good and clever nurse, and she and Payne managed him in their own fashion; and I believe that they dearly enjoyed the nursing of him.

But although his life was safe, the gravest fears were entertained as to his eyesight. Dr Fletcher—the authority who had been summoned from Exeter—in consultation with Mr Long, considered that he would be hopelessly blind. Mr Long was more hopeful; he ventured to differ somewhat from the great man, and thought that the sight of one eye, at all events, might possibly return in time, and with the very greatest care.

The room was kept dark ; perfect silence was enjoined. Ice to the head, and perpetual cooling lotions were to be applied ; and this course of treatment was to be continued unwearyingly for some time. Above all, the patient was not to be allowed to talk ; no questions were to be asked him ; no allusions to the accident or to his condition were to be made ; and if he spoke, he was to be answered in as few words as possible.

It was Mr Long's theory that the organs of sight were not actually injured, and that only the nerves of the eyes had received so severe a shock as to cause temporary blindness, which time and Nature might remove if the utmost care and attention were paid to the sufferer.

It may be imagined that nobody in Denver House was inclined to be wanting in either care or attention. We went about on tiptoe ; we spoke in whispers ; we muffled the doors in green baize ; no precaution was neglected to ensure perfect silence throughout the house. As to the cook, she very nearly forgot to cook our dinners, so absorbed was she in the preparation of the essence of beef, calves feet jelly, and in a variety of cooling iced draughts which were ordered to be kept constantly at the stranger's elbow.

Through all this agitation and commotion let it not be imagined that I had forgotten Nina. Every

day that passed brought her nearer to the appointed meeting with her lover. It was evident that she herself was far from being oblivious of the fact. I could see, by her pale and determined face, that she had made up her mind to go to him. The confusion in the household made it easier for her to carry out her plans. She little knew how intimately I was acquainted with them.

The morning of the day arrived at length. It was a grey, foggy morning, and a damp drizzle was falling; and Nina came down to breakfast with a flush upon her cheek that was almost feverish. I think she had been awake all night.

"How is he?" she asked, alluding to the sick man.

"He has had a good night," I answered, busying myself among the teacups, and not seeming to notice her. "Mrs Temple thinks he will be on the sofa in a day or two."

That afternoon I said to Mrs Temple,—

"I have some important business in town. Do you think you could do without me for a day, or perhaps two?"

"Why, of course, my dear."

"Then I think I shall go up to London by the night train, and very likely Nina will go with me; but promise me to say nothing about it to her. I cannot quite tell you why; but I don't want any-

thing said to her about it. Will you promise not to allude to it?"

The good lady looked somewhat surprised at so strange a request, and the earnestness with which I pressed it; but she asked no questions, and promised readily not to speak of my going to town before Nina.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW I CHANGED MY CLOTHES.

"Meet me by moonlight alone,
In the grove at the end of the vale."—*Wade.*

NINA's maid was a young woman who rejoiced in the name of Susanna Keats. She had dark eyes and hair, and a pale complexion. She was tall and very slightly made; and she had a noticeably ladylike figure. All her movements were quiet and gentle, and showed an amount of refinement unusual in a person of her class. A short time ago I had given her one of my dresses, my own maid being short and stout, and having declared that it was useless to her; and Susanna had smilingly told me—not without a touch of pardonable vanity—that it had fitted her without the slightest alteration being required.

About six o'clock on that afternoon, Nina went to her own room, and I heard her ring the bell for

her maid. She remained upstairs for about half-an-hour, and then came down again into the drawing-room, took up the novel she had been reading, and appeared to be deeply absorbed in it.

No sooner had she done so, than I quietly rose and left the room. I went upstairs to the little work-room where the lady's-maids were in the habit of sitting at their dressmaking. I opened the door cautiously—fortune favoured me—Susanna was alone. The girl was standing up by the table doing nothing; she appeared to be absorbed in thought. When I opened the door she started and coloured, and took up some of the finery that lay littered upon the table before her, pretending to busy herself over it.

"Susanna, come into my room a minute; I want to speak to you."

She followed me without a word.

When we reached my room, I turned the key in the door, and I noticed that she looked terrified by this simple action, and that she trembled violently.

"Susanna," I said, as kindly as I could, "don't look so frightened; I am not angry with you. I only want to ask you something. Miss Thirlwall has been telling you that you are to go with her on a journey to-night, has she not?"

"Oh! ma'am," stammered the girl, "how ever did you know? Miss Thirlwall has made me promise

to say not a word to a living creature, and I am sure, ma'am, I wouldn't say a word to harm my young lady, so kind as she has always been to me—I would not say a word against her for the world."

"I don't want you to say anything against her, Susanna," I said, smiling. "You are quite right to be fond of your mistress, but you need not mind speaking to me about this journey which she is going to make, because I know all about it already."

"Indeed, ma'am!"

"Yes, she is going up to London, and she was going to take you because she could not, of course, go alone by the night train, and she does not want me to go with her because she is afraid it would knock me up. I am not very strong, you know; but I think she is very young, and you are very young too, Susanna, and I mean to go myself and take care of her, so I am going to be her maid instead of you. Do you follow my meaning?"

"N—o, not quite, ma'am," said Susanna, looking puzzled.

"Well, then, I will explain to you. If I told Miss Thirlwall that I meant to go with her, she would be so vexed at the idea of my going through so much fatigue just to be with her, that she would probably give up her journey altogether, which, as she has settled to go, and the friends whom she is going to stay with are expecting her, and most anxious for

her to come, would be a great pity; would it not?"

Whether Susanna accepted this somewhat audacious theory concerning the "friends," or whether she had already scented the episode "lover" in the proposed journey, I know not. She was, at all events, too discreet to betray that she was able to put any other interpretation upon her mistress's nocturnal plans than the very simple and natural one which I had seen fit to expound to her. She answered my last question with the demureness of a Quakeress,—

"Certainly, ma'am."

"Very well then, do see now what I want you to do? I want to personate her maid, to pretend that I am *you*, and to go with her."

Here Susanna's self-control fairly forsook her; her astonishment was unbounded.

"To pretend to be me!" she cried. "To dress up as me, do you mean, ma'am?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I do mean."

"Well, I never!" casting up her hands in utter amazement.

Having succeeded in making her grasp this gigantic idea, I next proceeded to bind her to secrecy; she was to hold her tongue absolutely and entirely to every single creature in the house, for the space of one night. I deemed it useless to bind her down for a longer term, knowing well that the

solemnest of vows will hardly compel any woman in possession of a secret to retain it within her own breast for above four-and-twenty hours. I gave Susanna 'a shorter term of probation; to-morrow morning, I told her, she was to inform Mrs Temple that Miss Thirlwall and myself had gone up to London by the night train, for a day, or perhaps two—our return was uncertain; and after telling Mrs Temple, she was free to impart the fact to anybody else she liked.

I then extracted from her the orders as to her proceedings which Nina had given her. Nina had told her to dress herself very quietly in a dark dress, a long black cloak, and a black bonnet, and to tie a thick veil over her face. I made her instantly fetch me the identical cloak and bonnet which she had meant to wear. She was to put up a few necessaries for her own use and for her mistress into a dressing-bag, and I next made her get the bag and pack it before my eyes; and then Nina had ordered her to meet her at half-past nine at the small wicket-gate at the bottom of the garden; she was to go there and wait for her, and not speak a single word.

That was all that Susanna knew; and quite enough too, I reflected! Wondering how such a secret and mysterious departure from her own house could possibly be accounted for in the maid's

mind, by the story of the "visit to her friends in London," which I had just given her. I thought it not unwise to dismiss her with a slight hint as to Nina's sanity.

"Your mistress is a very charming young lady, Susanna," I said confidently, "but I don't mind telling you that I consider her exceedingly foolish sometimes; and she does such wild things that, upon my word, it is a good thing I am always with her to look after her."

To which Susanna merely responded,—

"Yes, ma'am," as before; and left me in perfect uncertainty as to how much she believed of what I had been saying.

My plans being now all prepared, nothing remained but to carry them into execution. Nina and I dined alone together at half-past seven, Mrs Temple's dinner being sent up to her on a tray as usual, as she always had her meals now in the little ante-room that adjoined the sick-man's chamber.

Mr Long came whilst we were at dinner, and after visiting his patient, came in to have a glass of sherry with us, and to report progress from above.

"How do you find him to-night?" inquired Nina, as she filled up his glass.

"Better, Miss Thirlwall—better. But, bless me, it will be a long time before he is all right again—the shock to the system has been so great."

"And the eyes?" I asked.

Mr Long shook his head.

"Ah! I can't say much about them yet. No improvement yet; but the inflammation is beginning to abate to-day very decidedly, and then I shall be able to make a more minute examination; there is next to no pain now—that is all in our favour."

"I wish to goodness you would find out the poor man's name, Mr Long," said Nina, a little impatiently. "It is so tiresome having to call him 'the man,' or 'the stranger.' Do ask him his name."

"My dear young lady, I would not do so for the world. His memory is utterly confused and clouded; his mind is in a vague, chaotic state. To question him would be to set him thinking, and to make him think would be to retard his recovery considerably. No—no, we must have patience. I daresay your curiosity will be satisfied in time, and you will find out his name and all about him as he begins to get stronger."

"When you do find it out it will, I daresay, be only Brown or Jones," I said, laughing.

"Well, young ladies, I must be off; I have nine patients to visit before bedtime. Good-night, and many thanks to you. A beautiful moonlight night, Miss Thirlwall; fine thing for the harvest."

"No! is there a moon to-night?" exclaimed Nina, with almost a ring of dismay in her voice.

The good doctor laughed as he stood with the door in his hand.

"Miss Thirlwall looks as sorry there is a moon as if she were going out poaching."

Nina laughed confusedly.

"Oh! the dogs always bark so at the moon; I was thinking of your patient," she said; and Mr Long assured her that she need not be anxious about that, for he had given him an opiate which would enable him to sleep through the barkings of a whole pack of hounds.

After the doctor's departure we both became rather silent; we kept up a little desultory talk about the sick man, and about the state of the other sufferers from the railway accident quartered in the village, who were all progressing satisfactorily—the woman at the Rectory indeed had been taken to her home; but her conversation languished somewhat, and we were both glad when dinner was over, and we could adjourn to the drawing-room.

Nina took up a book, but at a few minutes past nine she jumped up suddenly and said her head ached so intolerably that she should go to bed. Of course I professed no surprise, indeed I had been confidently expecting the "headache" for some minutes.

For how many "white lies" has not that most convenient malady been answerable!

"Good-night, dear," I said quietly, putting up my face to be kissed.

But Nina flung her arms round me, and kissed me with an abandonment and an effusion which forced me into some expression of astonishment at so unusual an outburst of affection.

"Why, Nina, what is it?" I asked, feeling somewhat guilty and ashamed of myself.

"Nothing, Maggie, dear! only I love you very dearly, and I want you never to think me a wicked, ungrateful wretch."

I kissed her, and told her to go to bed, and not be a silly child; and she kissed me again and went away.

No sooner had she left the room than I hastened upstairs, and locking myself into my room, proceeded to array myself in my borrowed garments. A black dress of my own of a simple fashion, surmounted by Susanna's long cloth jacket and her little, close straw bonnet, black with a little feather in it, in which, I said to myself as I surveyed my image in the glass, I looked remarkably nice, soon effected my transmogrification. I next tied a veil over my face, so thick that my features were absolutely undistinguishable, and then, taking up the bag which stood already packed by my dressing-table, I sallied forth from my room.

I got safely down the back staircase, and out of a side door into the garden.

The moon, as Mr Long had told us, was shining brightly, the lawn was as light as day. I did not venture to strike across it, but skirted round it, keeping well under the shadows of the trees, then through the shrubbery path, until I reached the gate where Nina had directed Susanna to await her coming.

I had not long to wait; in a very few minutes Nina joined me, closely muffled up in a thick, heavy cloak, and with her face hidden under as dark a veil as my own.

"Susanna!" in a trembling whisper.

"Yes, miss!" still lower.

"Have you the bag?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then follow me; keep close behind me, well in the shadow, and don't speak a word."

I obeyed her in silence.

She went out of the garden into the highroad, along which she proceeded for about three-quarters of a mile, Nina keeping under the shadow of the hedge, and I following her closely, thinking to myself what a wild expedition Frank's unreasonable suspicion and jealousy had led us both into. Once a couple of labourers passed along the road, and later on the doctor's high-wheeled gig came flying by us full in the moonlight; on both occasions Nina crouched tremblingly down into the ditch, until they had safely gone by, and no one appeared

to see us. At length the little inn, where Frank had appointed to meet her, loomed in sight, and very soon Frank himself stepped out of a patch of shadow just in front of us. Close by stood his dogcart in waiting. He had no servant.

"My darling!" he whispered, taking her passionately into his arms; "I knew you would come."

"Oh! Frank," pleaded Nina, "won't you let me off now?—won't you let me go home again?"

"What! when I have the licence in my pocket" he cried gaily, "and the chance of making you my own in twelve hours' time! You don't suppose I shall be so weak as to let you go *now*, do you?"

He lifted her into the dogcart as he spoke.

"You have your maid?"

"Yes, she is here. Do behave properly before her," in a still lower whisper, which made me laugh to myself.

He helped me up behind, sprang up himself in front, and in another minute we were off.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW I GAVE NINA AWAY.

"And make two lovers happy."—*Pope*.

FRANK was as good as his word.

That short drive in the dogcart from the inn to

the station was all he saw of his lady-love until we reached Paddington Station at four o'clock the following morning.

He put Nina and myself safely into a first-class carriage by ourselves, and retired by himself to the smoking compartment, where I have no doubt that he consoled himself by the consumption of an unlimited supply of cigars throughout the tedious hours of the night. At least, I know that Nina told him he smelt of tobacco, and was "very nasty" when he came to help her out of the carriage in the gloom of the early morning, and I suppose she was a better judge than I was upon the subject, for her face was very suspiciously close to his when he put it in at the window. I believe Nina was awake the whole night; but as to me, being thoroughly tired out, and not being in the least in love, I slept profoundly in my corner throughout the journey, turning my back, however, carefully towards Nina before composing myself to sleep, lest any unlucky chance should betray me to her.

It was when we reached London that the principal danger of my being detected lay. But fortunately it was a very foggy morning, and at four o'clock even in July the light is but very grey and uncertain, and that, added to the darkness of the station, and the thickness of my veil, which I kept persistently drawn down over my face, enabled me to escape recognition.

As to Frank, he was so over head and ears in love, and so taken up with gazing into Nina's face, that had I had no veil on at all, I doubt whether he would have been capable of seeing me; my chief danger lay from Nina's sharp eyes, that were looking nervously around her as she alighted from the train, for fear, I suppose, of seeing any of her acquaintances on the platform.

Having no luggage, we proceeded at once to the hotel, where our rooms were already secured, and where Frank took leave of Nina. As we entered the narrow passage through which we were admitted into the hotel, Nina said to me without even looking at me,—

“Go to bed, Susanna, as quickly as you can. I don't want you at all; but you must be up and call me at half-past eight punctually.”

She went into her room and shut the door behind her, leaving me free to follow my own devices.

My own devices were somewhat peculiar. Instead of going to bed as I had been ordered to do, I went into the bedroom that had been provided for me, and took off my veil and smoothed my hair, after which I put on my bonnet—or rather Susanna's bonnet—again, and went downstairs again, and having induced the chambermaid, by the persuasive influence of half-a-crown, to re-open the front door for me, I went out into the street.

Half-an-hour later, having been successful in the long and arduous task of arousing "Jeames" the footman from his well-earned slumbers, and having induced him by unwearying perseverance and much physical labour to open the door to me, behold me in an upper chamber in a house in Westbourne Terrace, where I have just been relating the whole history of my night's escapade to a shivering little woman in a white dressing-gown, who has risen from her bed to listen to my story.

"And you mean to say that Frank is actually going to marry her this morning?" asks Helen Warner,—for it is she whom I have so unmercifully knocked up out of her bed, and we are sitting in her husband's dressing-room, whilst he, good man, is snoring peacefully among his pillows in the adjoining chamber.

"Yes, actually and really at ten o'clock at St Simon's Church in the City, and you, my dear, must be present at the ceremony, and your husband too."

"But I haven't a dress fit to go in!" demurred Helen.

"Neither has the bride," I answered, laughing; "she will be married in a very shabby brown cachemire in which she has travelled half the night. Seriously, Helen dear, you must make no objections, please, because this silly child of mine has been so imprudent and foolish, that Heaven knows

what people may not say of her, if I cannot get her respectably married before proper witnesses ; and you and your husband, who are both his cousins, are the very people of all others who will make the whole thing appear correct in the eyes of the world, and prevent people saying anything ill-natured by your presence at the marriage."

"Well, I always did think Frank Powell had gone clean out of his mind after you threw him over ; but this beats anything I ever heard of him. What a madman he must be ! But I am glad he is not fretting for you still."

"Oh no ! that is all over long ago, and he seems quite infatuated with Nina ; but it was too bad of him to inveigle the poor child into a runaway match. If I did not feel myself to a certain degree in his debt, I would not have humoured his extraordinary whim to the extent of allowing her to marry him in such a way ; but I have always felt that I behaved cruelly to him, and although the whole thing was a tissue of mistakes and misunderstandings, still he had a right perhaps to be angry with me."

"And you, Maggie dear, are you not going back to your husband ? It seems so strange, and so sad."

I put up my hand quickly with a gesture of pain.

"Hush ! Helen ; do not speak of that ; my future, alas ! is as dark as ever ; tell me about yourself, are you happy ?"

"Quite! Frank is the best of husbands."

"And baby?"

"Oh, he is such a pet! You must come and see him," she cried rapturously.

"I will come back and lunch with you after the wedding and inspect him," I said, rising; "but now I must go, or Nina will be missing her lady's-maid! You will be sure to be there, Helen?"

"Oh yes; I will be in plenty of time; but I must go and wake up my poor husband, and tell him what I have promised to do in his name, and there isn't so very much time, Maggie, for I suppose it will take nearly an hour to get to that church. How surprised Frank will be to see us!"

I left her, and returned to the Great Western Hotel.

Half-past eight having struck, I armed myself with a cup of tea and a slice of bread-and-butter, and entered Nina's room.

The curtains were drawn round the head of her bed, so that I was hidden from her. I busied myself about the room drawing up the blinds, setting out her bath, and doing all the things which maids generally do on coming into one's room in the morning; I flattered myself that, for a novice, I acquitted myself remarkably well.

"Susanna, is that you?" says Nina suddenly from the bed.

I murmured an inarticulate assent.

A moment's silence, during which I am employed in lugging a great can of cold water across the floor, with a view to emptying it eventually, if I ever succeed in getting it so far, into the bath.

"Susanna," says Nina again, from behind the bed curtains, and this time there is a considerable amount of hesitation and restraint in her voice, "there is something that must be told to you this morning, so I may as well tell you at once: perhaps, indeed, you may have guessed at something of the kind, but, anyway, it is no use hiding it from you any longer, the fact is—I—I am going to be married this morning."

"I know you are, you little wretch!" I answered aloud, in my usual voice.

"*Maggie!*" with one spring Nina is out of bed, staring at me with such a mixture of dismay, terror, and confusion depicted upon her countenance, that serious as the moment is, I cannot for the life of me help laughing at her.

She turned away from me, and buried her face among her pillows.

"My dear," I said, going to her; and sitting down on the bed by her side, I took her hands in mine, "you do not suppose I was going to allow you to run away with Mr Powell by yourself, did you?"

"Oh! but how did you know?" gasped Nina breathlessly.

"Never mind how I know," I answered, smiling; "I found it out, and, as I knew you to be a head-strong young woman bent upon having your own way, I determined to look after you myself. You know very well, Nina dear, that you will be happier in your own mind for having your old guardian at your wedding. You know that your poor mother specially- desired that your marriage should be sanctioned by me; I am sure you will feel glad by-and-by that you have not gone against her last wishes."

She clung to me, weeping silently.

"Not that I approve of your escapade, young lady; don't imagine it; and your lover is a most audacious young gentleman, as I shall take the liberty of telling him some of these days; but you are a couple of young fools running away from your friends, and, what is worse, threatening by your folly to compromise your good name. It was not very likely that I was going to allow you to elope by yourself, with no better protection than that of your lady's-maid, so I borrowed Susanna's bonnet and cloak, and here I am."

"I will go back with you to Denver, if you wish it," she said, quite penitently and humbly.

"What! and leave your fine lover kicking his

heels at St Simon's Church by himself? No, I don't think you will do that, my dear; he would have cause indeed to complain of you if you were to play him such a shabby trick. No, you have chosen to embark upon this expedition of doubtful discretion, and now you must carry it out to the end; besides, I, upon my own responsibility, have invited some relations of Mr Powell's, who happen to be old friends of mine, to be present at the ceremony; so you will be respectably married in spite of yourself, although you won't look very bride-like, my poor Nina, in your old brown dress."

"Oh! Maggie, don't laugh at me. I am very sorry; but if you knew how Frank urged me—not that he is to blame in any way remember, for, of course, I need not have gone if I had not chosen."

"Never mind," I said, smiling and kissing her, "I will not blame either of you if you will make each other happy. Now get up and dress as quickly as you can, for there is not very much time to spare."

Within an hour's time Nina and I were in a hansom, being borne rapidly towards St Simon's Church.

The poor child was very pale, and held my hand tightly all the way, not saying a single word to me on the road. As to me, I had resumed my thick veil, as I did not want the bridegroom to recognise me as I entered the church.

The great, empty, old-fashioned church, with its high pews and its white, staring east window, struck cheerlessly upon us as we came in. The pew-opener and the beadle received us in the porch, and at the east end stood the clergyman, and Frank, looking very melancholy all by himself, awaiting our arrival. As we walked up the aisle I caught sight of a pink rose on the apex of a bonnet hidden below the sides of a pew half-way up; the bonnet bobbed suddenly up and down again as I passed, and I caught sight of Helen's pretty face, brimful of excitement and curiosity; I saw, too, that her husband was with her.

Nina reached the altar-rails, and the clergyman steadied his spectacles upon his nose, and the service began. I then turned round and gave Helen a sign. She and her husband instantly slipped out of their pew, and came and ranged themselves close behind us, so that we presented together quite a respectable little wedding-party.

When the question was put, "Who giveth this woman to this man?" I stepped forward and answered, "I do," in a clear and distinct voice; and the bridegroom distinctly started, which, considering that he had deputed the beadle to perform this portion of the ceremony, was not perhaps surprising.

But shall I ever forget Frank Powell's face

when, the service being satisfactorily concluded, he turned round and suddenly confronted the three people who, all unknown to himself, had stood behind him to see him married—his two cousins and myself!

He looked utterly paralysed with surprise, and yet he was not able to say a word, or to demand an explanation. Nina was on his arm, and there was nothing for it but to lead her into the vestry. Once there, however, his astonishment burst forth into words.

"Maggie!—I beg your pardon, Mrs Hardcastle—is it possible that it is you? What on earth has brought you to this church just as my wedding was taking place?"

"Considering that I am Nina's guardian," I answered, smiling, and holding out my hand to him, "I think that it is very natural that I should be here."

"And it was *you* then who gave her away?"

"Yes; and I hope, Frank, that the value of the gift will induce you to forget all old scores against the giver."

"But I cannot understand how you have come to be Nina's guardian," he said, still bewildered, taking my hand, however, and pressing it.

"Never mind; Nina will tell you all about it by-and-by. Do you not see Helen and her hus-

band, who have come to see you married, and to give you their good wishes too?"

He shook hands with them mechanically, and then the register was signed, and we all came out of the vestry again; but I think Frank, in spite of his happiness, looked rather foolish amongst us—I had so completely turned the tables on him.

A brougham waited for him and his bride at the door. We pressed round Nina, wishing her good-bye.

"I had better send you a box of clothes from home, had I not? Where will you be?"

"Oh! please do, Maggie; we are going to Ventnor for a week; send it to the hotel as quick as you can. What shall I do till it comes, in this horrid old dress?"

"It is your very just punishment for attempting a runaway match, Mrs Powell," said Helen, laughing.

Frank Powell drew me for a moment aside.

"Does she know," he whispered to me, "all about you and I, Maggie?"

"Not one single word; she does not even know that I have ever known you. You can tell her what you like, Frank; but if you are kind, you will tell her only that I am an old friend. Pray do not make her hate me, for I love her dearly. We have been like sisters to each other; and—and, Frank, it has made me so glad that you are happy

at last; and will you not forgive me now—now that you have won so sweet a wife for yourself?”

“Dear Maggie,” he murmured, “the past is dead and gone. We will always be friends now, will we not?”

“Always,” I answered fervently; and pressing my hand once more, he sprang into the brougham by the side of his lovely young wife.

And Nina, leaning out of the carriage-window, was calling out to me, half crying, half laughing,—

“Oh! Maggie, dear, I have no lady’s-maid! What on earth shall I do without my Susanna?”

And thus they passed out of our sight, leaving us three standing upon the church steps looking somewhat disconsolately after them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW I FIND A SILK LETTER-CASE.

“But this is wondrous strange.”—*Shakespeare.*

I WENT back with Helen Warner to lunch. I talked over old Follerton days with her, and I discussed politics with her husband, whom I found a very commonplace individual indeed, although he had once given me, unconsciously, so many heart-burnings. I wondered what Helen could have seen in

him ; but that is an inscrutable and unanswerable question, which we ask vainly ourselves concerning three-fourths of our married acquaintances, and to which no satisfactory answer is ever forthcoming. Something, presumably, Helen had seen in him, for she was quite happy, and rosy, and plump, and evidently well content with her lot in life.

After luncheon I duly inspected the baby. I felt its legs and arms, and dandled it for a few minutes, and did and said all I hope that I was expected to do and say concerning it. Then I bade the Warner family farewell, and went out again by myself.

I meant to go home by the evening train, and had already telegraphed to Mrs Temple to send the carriage to meet me—not, however, telling her the important news about Nina ; such news it was absolutely impossible to telegraph, and I felt that a long explanation was owing to the good lady.

For the present, of course, our home—hers and mine—would continue to be at Denver ; but how long this state of things would last was now very uncertain, and I sighed as I thought of beginning life afresh by myself in some new place.

After their short honeymoon was over, Frank and Nina were coming to Denver to pay us a visit, she had said, and then I supposed something would be settled for the future. There was a good deal that was dreary and sad for me in the prospect.

Having lost Nina, I had lost also the chief interest and pleasure of my life.

How long was I to go on like this, I wondered? Was my separation from my husband to last for ever? What reason was there for our being apart? He had loved me dearly—so dearly that he had deceived me, and lowered his own self-esteem, that he might win me. Had I not forgiven him long ago, fully and freely? and did I not acknowledge to myself that my life was becoming unbearable away from him? Oh! if I only knew where to find him, how gladly would I not seek him out, and fall at his feet, praying him to return to me!

Almost unconsciously at first, but presently with a set and resolute purpose, I turned in the direction of Harley Street.

A sudden determination made the colour come into my cheeks and quickened my steps. I would go and see my husband's mother, and entreat her to tell me where I could find him; perhaps even he might be there himself. The bare thought was sufficient to make my heart beat.

As I drew near the house, I perceived that some commotion was going on at the door: a group of men, some of them hook-nosed and all of them unpleasant in appearance, were disputing loudly together in the hall, the door of which stood wide open. The house was covered with placards.

"On view this day—sale of handsome furniture, and valuable pictures and china, etc.," caught my eyes, in big print, staring out at me from every window. There was an auction going on.

Sick at heart, I went up to the door, and as the men made way civilly at my approach, I addressed myself to one of the most respectable-looking amongst them,—

"There is a sale in this house, I see?"

"Yes, ma'am, furniture to be sold unreservedly. Would you walk up, ma'am, and see if there is any lot you would particularly fancy?"

"Can you tell me the name of the present owner, please? I used to know this house."

"Owner just dead, ma'am—an old lady, by name Hardcastle. The sale is by order of the executors."

"She had a son," I said, falteringly; but my informant knew nothing about the son; he could tell me no more about the family—the lease was up, and the furniture was to be sold—that was all he knew about it.

"Won't you walk up, ma'am, and take a look round?" he repeated politely.

Impelled by a sad curiosity, I went upstairs. The drawing-room was all in confusion; white tickets were stuck all over the furniture; the carpets and curtains were done up in bundles; the alabaster figures, which I used to hate so much,

were all huddled together on the floor in one "lot."

Only the piano stood in its old place between the two rooms—the piano by which Stephen had clasped me so passionately to his heart!

Ah! how sad it was! I went and stood by it musingly, dreaming over my life again, and its seemingly irreparable mistakes, till I could no longer bear it—something came up in my throat and seemed to choke me. I turned away hurriedly and went out of that desolate house, feeling that my last link with my husband was broken, my last chance of hearing of him gone.

By the next morning I was back again in Devonshire. I may as well say at once, before proceeding with my narrative, that Nina's marriage created a nine days' wonder, not only in the mind of Mrs Temple and that of all our household, but also in the whole of our peaceful country neighbourhood.

But although it occasioned surprise and astonishment, it did not—owing to the fact, which I took care to publish widely, of my having gone up to town with her—cause the faintest breath of scandal or reproach against her. No one has ever found out to this day that Frank travelled up to London in the same train with us; if Susanna Keats divined it she never betrayed her suspicions, and the fact of his having left the Davidsons' house

a week previously, quite prevented any body from guessing the real state of the case. Her marriage was pronounced on all sides to be "odd," "eccentric," and "quite like one of dear Miss Thirlwall's whims," but no one ever spoke of it in harsher terms.

Indeed, Mrs Davidson, who considered herself a clever woman, loudly protested that she had known of the engagement all along, and that dear Mr Powell had as good as told her right out that he intended to be married very quietly in London before the month was out. He had not exactly told her the lady's name; but it had been quite easy for her to put two and two together. I was careful to affect a profound belief in this lady's amiable self-delusion.

On returning to Denver, my first inquiries were after the progress of our invalid. Mrs Temple could not say that he had improved very much; he was on the sofa, but still hopelessly blind, and apparently suffering from great depression. She herself, poor woman, was so evidently utterly worn out and exhausted with her long-continued nursing, that I was quite determined not to allow things to go on in the same way any longer.

"Now that Nina is gone, I am going to take my fair share of the nursing," I said to her decidedly. "I am not going to allow you to knock yourself up in this way."

"My dear, you are very young, and know nothing at all about nursing," said Mrs Temple.

"Very well, then, I shall telegraph for a professional sick nurse from town."

Whereat Mrs Temple was deeply offended.

"As if I did not know a great deal more than any one of them," she said, tossing her head; "a set of lazy, ignorant creatures. Why, you don't suppose I should give up the case at this stage to a person of that class?"

"Then I must help you."

"You might perhaps sit in the ante-room during the day, and if he rings, call me," was the only concession she would make.

So I determined to take my place in the little dressing-room that very day; and, needless to say, I was quite sure that nothing would induce me to call Mrs Temple, even though the patient should ring. I would attend upon him myself.

"He is asleep just now," whispered Mrs Temple, creeping on tip-toe out of the bedroom; "sit down with a book, my dear, and be *sure* you summon me if he wants anything. You must promise me that you will."

"Oh yes, I promise," I answered, laughing; but nothing was further from my intentions.

She left me, and I confided her to Payne's care, and bade her see that she went to bed and had a thorough rest.

I was left alone in the little dressing-room, the door into the darkened bedroom being wide open.

I took up my novel and tried to read ; but either it was a very dull one, or I was strangely inattentive, for I found it utterly impossible to fix my mind upon what I read. My thoughts kept wandering off far and wide, and I could not concentrate them in the very least upon my book.

At last I laid it down and sat quite still—doing nothing. It was a wet day ; the hills were all shrouded with mist ; the prospect without was cheerless. I turned my back to the window, and felt quite glad of the company of a small fire which burnt brightly in the grate. The table was covered with medicine bottles, prescriptions, and empty cups and glasses of all kinds. A kettle was singing away pleasantly on the hob. From the sickroom within I could hear the steady ticking of the clock, and the regular breathing of the sleeper.

The silence began to be oppressive. My own thoughts became intolerable ; I longed for something to happen—for some event to break the stillness. Something did happen ; the doctor came. It was not a very exciting event, but served to dispel the nervous irritation that had been creeping over me.

“ So you are in charge now ? ” he whispered to me, when, after a brief inspection of his patient, he crept softly back into the outer room to where I sat.

"Yes, I am so glad you have come," I answered back, in the same tone.

"Why, are you ill?"

"No, only it is so dreadful sitting doing nothing."

The good old gentleman laughed softly.

"If you want an occupation, look after your maid-servants a little sharper."

"What do you mean, Mr Long?"

"Do you know that they go out walking in the lanes at night?"

I looked incredulous.

"You have been away, or I should have told you before," he said, with a something that was almost a twinkle in the corner of his eye; "but I assure you that, rather more than a week ago, on a fine moon-light night, I saw a couple of your maids come slinking out of the gate at the end of the shrubbery into the road; and when they heard my gig coming you should have seen how they scuffled down under the shadow of the hedge, as though the Old Gentleman in person was at their heels!"

I coloured guiltily up to the roots of my hair.

"You may depend upon it, Mrs Hardcastle, those girls were up to mischief!" he continued solemnly; and again there was a humorous screwing up of his eyelids difficult to explain. "I thought I might as well just mention it, you know; it's quite as well to know about these things. Of course,

it's quite between ourselves—you may be sure I sha'n't speak of it to anybody else. Good-bye, Mrs Hardcastle. Patient sleeping beautifully,—will look in to-morrow first thing—continue the lotion and the tonic. Good-bye.”

And to this hour I have never been able to discover whether or no that worthy little doctor had recognised Nina and myself on our nocturnal escapade down the moonlit road.

Left alone again, there was another long interval wherein nothing happened, and no sound disturbed the perfect tranquillity of the room. Then I got the cramp in my foot, and was forced to get up and stretch my legs. I began to think that sick nursing, if it consisted entirely of sitting still and doing nothing, was decidedly not my vocation.

I began moving softly about the room in quest of something to interest or entertain me. The books in the book-shelf were not of a lively nature: three fat volumes entitled the *Family Doctor*, an odd volume of *Blackwood*, ditto of the *Spectator*, *Hymns, Ancient and Modern*, and *Somebody On the Pentateuch*. I did not feel disposed to study any one of them. I moved on to the chest of drawers, and, out of sheer idleness, opened the top drawer softly. I became instantly aware that I was looking at the belongings of our sick guest, placed there probably on the night of the accident

by Mrs Temple's careful hands. There was a silver pencil-case, a bunch of keys, a broken piece of gold watch-chain, a dark silk scarf half burnt away, and one plain gold shirt stud. The little collection interested me. I pulled out the drawer still further—something more lay at the back of it—a little packet carefully folded up in silver paper. I must have been in a strangely inquisitive mood, for without a moment's hesitation I took it up and unfolded the paper.

Before me lay a little faded blue silk letter-case, embroidered with small white flowers worked round in a circle, and out of it, as I opened it, fell a little soiled grey glove.

I stood staring at it motionless, speechless, almost breathless, for the little blue silk case, with its chaplet of flowers, was no strange and unknown thing to me. *I had worked it myself!*

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW WE MET AGAIN.

"After long years."

I STOOD motionless, staring at the object I held in my hand. It must have been fully five minutes before my reason began to exert itself over the

astonishment which overpowered me. At first I only asked myself, over and over again, when was it that I had worked it?—how had it got here into this drawer?—had it been among my own things? in a sort of dazed bewilderment. Then, suddenly, I caught sight of the crumpled glove that had fallen out of the case. Whose was it? Where did it come from? Was it my own? All at once I remembered what Mrs Temple had told me the day of the railway accident; how she had taken a blue letter-case, embroidered with flowers, and containing an old glove, out of the breast-coat pocket of the unfortunate man who had been brought into our house.

The recollection shook me from head to foot.

It was *this*, then, that she had taken from him! The letter-case was his. But then, if so, how could it be my work?

I turned it over and over in my hands; I must have made a mistake, it was some other case like it, not this identical one, that I had worked. But even as I looked at it there flashed back into my mind a bygone scene of my life. The little French *salon* in the hotel on the Place of Vendome, the high windows, the red chairs, the or'molu clock, surmounted with the goddess Diana, on the mantel-piece; every detail of that room seemed to be woven up in that little silk case, and worked in as it were

with the stitches of its embroidered chaplet of flowers. I remembered it perfectly now; I had worked it in the first week of my marriage for a birthday present to my husband. I remembered it as if it were but yesterday,—how pleased he had been with the simple gift, and how he had put it in his pocket, telling me that he should value it always, and never be without it. But then, how came it—if indeed it was the same—*here*, in the possession of this poor man? And then, suddenly, my heart beat violently, my pulses tingled, my head throbbed.

Great heavens! *who* was this man? I asked myself wildly.

Could it be possible that this stranger, flung by the chances of a horrible accident into the very house where I was living—this man whose life had trembled in the balance, who lay even now prostrate and powerless, helpless, and in all probability hopelessly blinded, in the adjoining room,—could it be possible that *he* was my own husband?

I remembered, shuddering, how lightly I had asked every morning after him; how Nina and I had joked over his possible name; how carelessly I had gone my way all day long, singing or laughing or talking as usual; whilst *he*, good heavens! had been in pain and in danger. Could it be true that this was indeed the man whom I had sworn to love above all other men?

Trembling and pale, I crept softly through the open door into the bedroom. The sick man lay on his sofa, I could hardly distinguish his face, for the curtains were closely drawn and the room was dark. I came quite close and leant over the couch on which he lay. He stirred slightly, and from his lips there escaped a murmur,—

“Maggie, oh! my darling, when shall I see you again?” the words died away into a long shivering sigh.

I sank down on my knees beside him. It was my husband!

For a few minutes the joy of having found him, of being once more by his side, overpowered all other feelings. My happiness was intense. I realised in that moment that I loved him above all other earthly creatures,—that the heart which he had scarcely won long ago, when he had been daily with me, was, now that absence and loneliness had taught me to value his affection, entirely and solely his own. Oh, how could I ever have fancied that I loved Frank the best? How blind, how ignorant I had been! All at once I knew that I could never let my husband go from me again, that his presence with me was the completion and perfection of my existence.

But soon these happy thoughts were replaced by others of a more anxious nature; I remembered,

alas! that he was blind; that even Mr Long was doubtful of the recovery of his sight; that the physician from Exeter had not given a hope of it. And, moreover, he was in a most delicate and precarious state, his constitution had been rudely shaken, his nerves utterly shattered. The slightest excitement for him was to be carefully avoided, the least mental agitation might be injurious. To tell him who I was, to speak to him of my love, of my determination never to leave him again, might be almost fatal to his recovery. It would be impossible to do so. The secret of my presence must be religiously guarded from him; how was this to be done?

Whilst I knelt there, speechlessly gazing at the pale, handsome face, which was aged and altered almost beyond conception, I lost myself in wondering vainly in what manner I should manage to be by his side and yet remain unknown to him, a soft footstep behind me made me turn round and rise hastily to my feet.

Payne put in her head at the door and beckoned to me. I went out.

"I wish you would go and see Mrs Temple, ma'am," she said to me; "I don't think she is at all well."

"What is the matter?"

"Well, ma'am, I am sure I don't know, but if

you could go and see her for yourself it would be as well; I will stop here with the gentleman until you return."

I left her there, and went to Mrs Temple's room. I found her feverish and full of ailments.

"I am afraid I shall have to leave the poor man to you and Payne," she said, as I entered. "I am dreadfully afraid I am going to be ill, Mrs Hardcastle; you were quite right in saying that I had knocked myself up. I have a touch of my old enemy, ague, and feel altogether very unwell."

"Shall I send for Mr Long?"

"Oh no, not till to-morrow; he will be sure to be here in the morning; but I think you had better do what you suggested, my dear, and telegraph to London for a nurse."

"Not for the world!" I exclaimed hastily. "I can quite well nurse him myself."

"Do you think you can manage it?"

"I am sure I can," I answered earnestly. "Tell me, Mrs Temple, did you talk to him much?"

"Oh dear no, I have hardly spoken to him: the less you say the better."

"You don't think, then, that he would know the difference—I mean, could he tell by my voice that I was not *you*? It might agitate him, you know, to find a change of nurses."

"Oh, I don't suppose he would find out that; I

have hardly spoken above a whisper; but why do you ask?"

"Oh! only because—because I do not want him to be agitated in any way. I will send Payne to you, dear Mrs Temple; I hope a good night will set you up again, and that you will feel better in the morning."

But Mrs Temple was no better the next day, and Mr Long, when he came, imperatively ordered her to keep her bed.

I could hardly conceal my delight at his decision; I was most uncharitably and inhumanly glad of Mrs Temple's indisposition, for the nursing of my sick husband devolved, in consequence of it, entirely upon myself. How glad I was to sit all day long by his sick couch; to give him his food or his medicine with my own hands; to arrange his pillows, and to fulfil all the hundred little duties required of a sick nurse. He was very silent; he lay quite still, with his head upon his hand, brooding over his own thoughts; now and then he murmured a few words, more to himself than to me, or asked for something that did not require more than a monosyllabic answer. It was easy, under these circumstances, to preserve my incognito; I had only to answer yes or no, as occasion required, and I took care to whisper when I did so, or, at all events, to conceal my own voice under feigned tones. Stephen Hard-

castle barely noted my presence; he seemed so absorbed in his own mournful reflections that he was almost unconscious that any one was in the room with him.

Sometimes he muttered aloud in broken words, amongst which I could often catch my own name; sometimes deep sighs would break from him—heavy sighs out of the depths of his misery and his loneliness that were heartrending to me to listen to.

“No hope now,” he murmured; “it is too late; a blind cripple who cheated and deceived her; is it likely I can make her love me now?”

My eyes filled with tears. It was all I could do to prevent revealing myself to him, to fall at his feet and to clasp him to my heart.

Two days passed away, during which no alteration happened in his condition. On the afternoon of the third day, as I was smoothing out the cushions of his sofa, he suddenly caught my hand, and held it within his own.

I trembled as he took it.

“My kind nurse,” he said gently, “how ungrateful you must think me; what a great deal of trouble I am giving you! Your name? Was it not Mrs Temple?”

“Yes,” I murmured, almost inaudibly.

“What a gentle footstep you have, and such a soft small hand; it reminds me of a hand that I

used to hold long ago—long ago, the hand of a woman I loved—I shall never touch it again!" he sighed deeply, and dropped my hand suddenly, as though he had forgotten it; his thoughts had evidently wandered off far away.

Disguising my voice as far as I knew how, I spoke to him.

"Is she dead?"

He started violently.

"*Dead!* Good heavens! what makes you think so?—have you heard?—do you know?" He became suddenly so agitated and excited that I hastened to quiet him.

"No—no," I said soothingly, "no, of course I know nothing. I never heard of her; but you said you would never take her hand again. Why—why should you not?"

He shook his head sadly.

"No, not dead, only she is true, and good, and upright, and she will never forgive me."

"Have you then wronged her so deeply?" I ventured to ask timidly.

He did not answer my question. Only, like a sad echo of the past, he repeated over and over again,—*"She will never forgive—never."* His head sank upon his breast, and he was silent; he had evidently forgotten that any one was talking to him.

After a few minutes I spoke once more.

"If she is so unforgiving, she must then be hard and uncharitable. Your fault cannot be so great, but that a good woman would in time forgive it."

He looked up suddenly at me, with his sightless eyes, startled and bewildered. Possibly, for all my caution, there was echo in my voice that reminded him of the woman of whom he spoke.

"I tell you," he said, with all the irritability of illness, "that she *cannot* forgive; she is not hard, but she never loved me. She believed in me, that was all; and when she found out that I was not true, her faith vanished, it was all I had got; and I lost that, too. How can she ever love me now? and if she love me not she will not forgive. Is love born of contempt and repulsion?" He laughed aloud, bitterly and harshly.

Oh, how was I to change this horrible and hateful idea that he had built up to himself of me?

I dared not pursue the subject any farther, I was too afraid of betraying myself.

I sat silent in the darkened room, with my hands clasped on my lap, and the tears dropping slowly, one by one, upon them, until I was aroused by the voice of the doctor in the adjoining room. I went softly out to speak to him. I had already settled with good Mr Long that he was to call me "Mrs Temple" in the presence of the patient; it might agitate him, I argued, to discover that a stranger

had replaced her, and it would be better to make him fancy that his first nurse was still in charge of him. Mr Long had readily agreed. He had even complimented me upon my prudence and foresight,—so warmly that, being conscious of my own ulterior motives, I blushed guiltily at his encomiums.

This afternoon Mr Long kept me for some minutes in the outer chamber, whilst he discoursed concerning Mrs Temple. He told me that he considered an immediate change of air to the seaside quite essential to her recovery. He wished her to go at once with one of the maids, and begged me to arrange for her departure within the next few days.

"She is very decidedly the worse for her long and anxious watching; but there is nothing radically wrong; all she wants is sea-air and rest. You must manage to get her away at once, Mrs Hardcastle. You and Payne can very well do the work here," indicating the next room with a jerk of his finger. "Who now can you spare to go with Mrs Temple?"

I suggested Susanna Keats.

"Nothing could be better—a bright, cheerful-looking girl. Now, my dear lady, will you undertake to send her off to Ilfracombe with Susanna to-morrow or the next day?"

I promised to do what I could, and Mr Long went in to see the sick man.

He was with his patient an unusually long time; and through the half-closed door I heard him, to my surprise, talking to him a good deal. He seemed to be asking him a great many questions. Then the blind was drawn up, and Mr Long seemed to be walking about the room. At last, however, all was quiet again, and the doctor came out. Directly I saw his face I perceived that he was unusually grave.

A sudden faintness seized me.

"What is it, Mr Long? You find him worse?" I faltered. "Will he never recover his sight?"

"Oh! his sight will be all right, I think, but I am very anxious now about something far worse."

"What do you mean?"

"His mind," replied Mr Long gravely.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW FRED BEHAVES.

"Oh what authority and show of truth,
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!"

Shakespeare.

"THAT is the worst of these railway accidents," continued Mr Long meditatively; "you never know where you are with them; you think you

have fathomed a case,—that you know the worst of it, that you see what you have got to deal with, and then, lo and behold something else, wholly unexpected, crops up in quite a different direction! Now this poor fellow—”

I had stood with my back to him struggling with my agitation; then suddenly I felt I could bear it no longer. It was *my husband* of whom he was thus speaking, dissecting him, anatomically as it were, before my very eyes as “a case!” I turned round to him and caught hold of his arm.

“For God’s sake!” I cried, almost wildly, “tell me what it is you fear? What is it that you mean?”

He looked surprised at my eagerness.

“If you will have a little patience, my dear young lady,” he said, somewhat testily, “I will tell you; I was just about to explain to you when you interrupted me. Oh! you need not be in the least frightened, I assure you; he is not at all likely to become dangerous; *that* is not the species of mania which I anticipate.”

I literally writhed under his words. No terror that I had ever undergone seemed to me to be half so awful as these implied explanations.

“Go on—go on, I entreat you!” I murmured, in a suffocated voice

“I was on the point of explaining to you that

this poor fellow must have some morbid grief or disturbance of mind preying upon him previous to the railway accident; he seems to be continually dwelling upon one subject, which is apparently some wrong, either real or imaginary, which he has, or fancies he has, inflicted upon some person who is dear to him. This idea must have been in his mind for some time, very likely for years, and the subsequent shock of the accident has, as it were, brought out and developed the incipient mental disease, which, if we are not careful, may very likely settle into a chronic state of melancholy mania."

"Can it not be averted?" I asked falteringly.

"It is a very difficult matter; we are acting entirely in the dark. You see we do not know the circumstances of the case; and, as far as I can make out, he has no relatives of any kind who could help us. When the sight returns, which it is my belief it will do shortly—did I tell you I find he can distinguish light to-day?—my fear is that, with the return of his eyesight, his brain may become more fatally clouded; the shock and the bewilderment of a strange room, of a house which he has never seen, and of new faces about him, may very possibly, in the present shattered condition of the nerves, shake the equilibrium of the mind altogether. His talk to-day is extremely rambling and disconnected; did you not find it so?"

I assented ; but to me, who held the keynote of his broken utterances, there had been nothing rambling or disconnected in them.

"Can nothing be done?" I asked again imploringly.

The good old gentleman looked at me somewhat keenly.

"You must not take these things so much to heart," he said kindly. "You will never make a good nurse if you are so desperately unhappy over your patients. As to doing anything—well, I must think it over. Don't let him brood too much. I think a little talking does him good. I must think the case well out to-night. Mind you get Mrs Temple off to-morrow if you can. Good-night!—good-night! Nobody need sit up now with him. If Payne sleeps in this room, you can go to bed and get a good night's rest." And nodding a kindly farewell, the little doctor took himself off.

I remained rooted to the spot where he had left me. Could it be true, I asked myself, what the doctor had said? Could this awful thing be really about to befall my husband? Was this affliction—worse, ten thousand times worse, than death—about to divide him from me for ever?—an impassable barrier through whose dense blackness neither love nor devotion could ever reach him more? What had I done? I cried aloud in my bitterness,—what

terrible sin had I committed, to be so cruelly punished? Would he never hear from my lips how earnestly I desired to wipe out our miserable past, and to begin a fresh life with him? Was he never to know how I loved him, and forgave him?

His voice, calling me from the inner room, cut short these bitter thoughts.

"Mrs Temple!"

I ran to his side.

"Yes, I am here."

"Do you know that I can see a little?" he said excitedly. "When the doctor drew up the blind I saw the light. He says my sight will come back, though he spoke of a slight operation being, perhaps, needful; but I should not fear that, if I could only see once more." He was silent for a minute, and then burst forth again in a wandering manner, as though speaking to himself. "But, ah! of what use is it? My little Madge will not be there. I shall not see her—I don't want to see her. Her face would be full of scorn and dislike. She would turn away her eyes. They used to look at me kindly sometimes; sometimes they were full of a gentle playfulness; sometimes there was a little confiding deference in them; but there never was any love in them—never! I used sometimes to try and fancy there was, but at my heart I knew better. If I saw them

now they would look angry and cold, and it would kill me! I could not bear it!"

I buried my face in the cushions of my chair. It was all I could do to render my sobs inaudible. I could not stay and listen to it any longer. It half broke my heart. I rang the bell for Payne, and stole softly out of his room.

I could not stop in the house. I felt stifled and oppressed. I longed to be somewhere where I could breathe freely. I went out into the garden, and, strolling through the small park at the back of the house, I reached the leafy shades of the deep woods above.

The quiet and peace of the summer evening soothed and comforted me. It was about six o'clock. The sun came glinting down through the branches of the beeches and shone upon their smooth, polished trunks, making them gleam like silver shafts; little squirrels flitted about from bough to bough; soft brown rabbits stole out from the banks to stare at me with solemn eyes, and then, with a whisk of their tails, scampered back again into their holes; a thousand birds twittered about me, filling the air with a sweet confusion of melody.

A reassuring sense of peace and hope stole over me when, half-an-hour later, I turned my steps back again towards the house. I felt happier and more hopeful, although I hardly knew why.

As I came near the house, I perceived a dogcart standing at the door; and when I came into the hall the butler came forward, and told me that a gentleman was waiting for me in the drawing-room. Wondering who it could be, I opened the door, and found myself instantly confronted by Fred.

My brother's visits were so few and far between, that I was considerably surprised at his appearance.

Fred was now very far removed from the companion of my childhood, to whom I had once been so devoted, and who had been my ideal of all that was admirable and lovable. He had been now for some time a curate in Shropshire. He was handsome still, but with a handsomeness which grated against me and irritated me. His features were regular and good; his hair was glossy, and well curled and profusely scented; and he wore very neat and carefully-tended little whiskers of a bright golden hue.

Fred had the reputation of preaching "lovely sermons," which drew forth tears from his lady admirers; and the slippers and tea-cosies, kettle-holders and footstools, worked for him by the female portion of his congregation, would, I believe, have filled a good-sized Pickford's van to overflowing. I wonder whether it was an innate

sinfulness in myself, or whether it was only the natural course of things which makes a prophet of "no honour" amongst the members of his own family, that caused me to be profoundly indifferent to my brother's saintly reputation. His sermons, eloquent and affecting as they were, left me dry-eyed and stony-hearted; his good looks put me out of temper; his gentle words filled me with vague suspicions of his truthfulness and good faith. Always I remembered the letter which he had kept from me to further his own interests by ruining my life—always I recollected that it was my brother who had urged me into marriage, by practising a distinct fraud upon me.

It was therefore with no very enthusiastic feelings that I went forward to-day to greet him.

"Why, Fred, what brings you?" putting up my cheek, which he just touched with his lips in salutation.

"How are you, Margaret?" I was never Maggie or Madge to him now. "I am sorry to hear you have been over-exerting yourself, by nursing a stranger brought into the house from that dreadful accident."

"I have not over-exerted myself at all, thanks."

"Are you not a *little* imprudent, my dear sister? In your position, you cannot be too careful."

"I quite understand my 'position,' as you call it,

thank you, Fred," and there was a dangerous light in my eyes. When Fred became censorious and dictatorial, I waxed savage at once.

"I am sorry to see you look offended, my dear sister. I can have no other desire than your welfare; and a word of warning, as from a clergyman—"

"Suppose we leave my welfare out of the question, Fred, and perhaps you will remember that 'taking in the stranger' and 'nursing the sick' are two things which Christianity teaches us, and which clergymen should enforce as a duty."

"Ahem! you take me up very shortly, Margaret—you are not gentle in your way of speaking; at the same time, I must repeat that my sister's good name—"

"For goodness' sake!" I interrupted sharply, "let me alone. I can take very good care of myself, and of my name too. Do drop your profession when you are alone with me, Fred; there is really no occasion for you to keep the farce up with me! Tell me what you have come for. Do you want dinner, or bed, or both?"

"Thank you, I should be glad if you can put me up to-night. I came over from Exeter on purpose to see you. I have been staying there with some friends. I thought I could not leave the neighbourhood without seeing you."

Such spontaneous attention was so rare on his part, that I was upon the point of asking him what he wanted of me. But remembering that if he required anything he was pretty sure to let me know of it in time, I restrained myself with an effort, and forced myself to be civil to him.

We dined together, my brother and I, in a somewhat melancholy *tête-à-tête*. Mrs Temple, who had decided upon going to Ilfracombe on the morrow, kept her own room; Mrs Payne had taken my place in the sick-man's chamber.

After dinner, Fred became sentimental over Nina's marriage.

"So Miss Thirlwall has married your old friend Frank Warner, or Powell, as he calls himself now! Dear me, what a pity!" and he balanced his spoon idly on the edge of his finger-bowl, looked out of window towards the green slopes of Nina's pretty little park, and sighed mournfully.

"Why is it a pity? I confess I fail to see it," I answered, rather resentfully.

"Oh—a pity, I mean, that a nice girl like that, with such a compact little property as Denver belonging to her, should throw herself away upon an unprincipled fellow like that."

"I don't know what you mean, Fred; Mr Powell will make Nina a most excellent husband. What can you mean by calling him unprincipled?"

"Ah! well, I don't want to quarrel with you about him. I always avoid hard words, dear Margaret: my profession is one of peace and gentleness."

"Then you should not make statements against persons' characters when you cannot substantiate them."

"I am only sorry for poor little Nina. Ah! Margaret, if it had not been for you—well, I won't reproach you! You have always been given to placing hindrances and impediments in the way of your brother's wishes!"

And for this brother I had once sacrificed my happiness! The words of an old song came back to me—the words of the wisest Englishman that ever lived,—

"Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot."

I did not remind him of that past episode of our lives: where would have been the use? To pierce through that thick layer of selfishness wherein 'he was encased as in a garment, would have required an amount of perseverance and energy for which I felt myself wholly incapable; all I said, was,—

"You need not waste any pity on Nina, Fred, she is perfectly happy."

"You have heard from her?"

"Yes, I had a long letter this morning: they are coming home soon."

"And you! what is to become of you?"

"I have not settled my plans at all," I answered vaguely. "I do not quite know what I shall do."

"It is a very sad thing, my dear Margaret, that you persist in remaining away from your husband," began Fred, in a reproving voice.

"How do you know that I persist?" I said lightly. "You know very little about it, Fred; suppose you don't give me advice upon a subject you don't understand."

"You have no intention, then, of seeking your husband, and of entreating him to take you back?"

"Certainly not," I answered, with asperity. "I have not the remotest intention of doing such a thing."

Fred sighed deeply, as though over the unconquerable wickedness of my heart. Then he stirred himself uneasily in his chair, and reached out his hand for a nectarine. After carefully skinning and eating it in silence, with a brow upon which care and anxiety were seated, he laid down his knife and fork, and cleared his throat.

"Now," I said to myself, "he is going to tell me what he wants of me."

Fred leant back in his chair.

"Since this is the case, my dear Margaret—sad

as it is, and deeply as I deplore it—it will enable you to do me a favour.”

“And the favour is—what, Fred?”

“I want you to lend me Follerton for a little while.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOW FRED DISCLOSES HIS LITTLE PLANS.

“And seem a saint when most I play the devil.”

Shakespeare.

“To lend you Follerton!” I exclaimed, aghast. “Good gracious, Fred! what an extraordinary request! To begin with, Follerton is not mine to lend.”

“It is your husband’s; and by the laws of our beautiful Marriage Service, it is therefore yours also. Did he not endow you with all his worldly goods?”

“But you don’t suppose,” I cried, without deigning to notice this specious line of argument,—“you don’t imagine that I should presume to dispose of any portion of my husband’s property without his knowledge and without his leave, especially now that I am living away from him? Surely, Fred, you must consider me to be bereft of all feelings of common decency and delicacy of mind, to make such a proposal to me!”

"What a fuss you make about a trifle, Margaret! I don't ask you to give me the place, or even to let it to me; I only want the loan of it for a few days."

"What on earth for?"

"I will explain to you, if you will not get so excited about things. You really should strive after more calmness, Margaret; such easily-aroused irritability betokens, I fear, a very ill-regulated mind."

I tapped my foot impatiently under the table.

"For goodness' sake, don't be such a prig, Fred! And tell me why you want Follerton."

Thus adjured, Fred proceeded to explain himself.

"You must know, my dear sister," he began, with a graceful wave of his well-shaped hand, that must, I think, have been one of his favourite pulpit actions, "that I have been staying for some weeks with some dear friends of mine near Exeter—a lady and her daughter."

"Some weeks, Fred! Why, what has become of your curacy, then? And how comes your rector to give you another long holiday? You were away a month at Easter, I remember."

"Oh, as to the curacy, I did not deem it necessary to tell you before, but I have resigned it. The fact is, the rector—most worthy man, but exceedingly pig-headed—did not fall in with my views upon several subjects; besides which, the place was extremely dull; so I left it about six

weeks ago. If you will be kind enough not to interrupt me, I will proceed."

"Go on, then."

"I want, then, to stay with Mrs Hartley and her daughter, a charming girl of seventeen. The mother is a widow, and, poor woman! is rather foolish and silly; but the daughter—"

"Is not penniless, I presume?" I said, laughing.

"No, no, not exactly. Lily has a snug little fortune of her own," he replied modestly.

"And you are engaged to her, Fred, and you want Kollerston for your honeymoon? Is that it?"

"Well, no, not exactly, Margaret. The fact is, I am not precisely engaged to Lily. The mother, foolish woman! will persist in making inquiries into my means, which are at present I do not blush to own—extremely small. They are, in fact, limited to the amount of the little fortune of our mother's which you and I have alike—£150 per annum."

"It is certainly not much to support a wife upon. I am not surprised at that foolish woman's objection to you on that score. But what about the living, Fred, that your godfather is to give you? Surely that is a good prospect for your future?"

"Well, unfortunately I have had the bad luck to offend Sir Fredrick by giving up his curacy. You see, the rector, Mr Wilmont, was his cousin, and he

has written to him what must have been a truly ill-natured and unchristian letter upon the subject of my resignation. I received a most violent epistle from my godfather about it, full of the most vindictive abuse. Poor old man ! I can make excuses for him, of course ; he is getting old, and is very obstinate."

"Oh ! he is pig-headed too, then ? It must be in the family."

"Yes, decidedly," replied Fred gravely, without the remotest idea that I was secretly laughing at him. "They are both of them filled with pride and self-conceit. However, far be it from me to cast evil names at either of them. I have shaken off the dust off my feet against them."

"What ! against Sir Frederick too ?"

"Well, I find that he is now very unlikely to give me Bedborough living when the present incumbent dies, so I did not see the use of attempting to make it up with him," explained my brother, with delightful candour.

"So you have lost your future prospects because of some idle and senseless quarrel with your rector !" I exclaimed impatiently. "I should have given you credit for more worldly wisdom, Fred."

"My dear Margaret, do not judge hastily. I trust that my prospects are still very good."

"Ah ! to be sure—there is Miss Lily, the heiress !" I said scornfully. "I had forgotten her."

"Well, perhaps I ought not to call her an heiress exactly; but, since you have put it so, it would possibly not be a bad definition. She has, I have ascertained, eight hundred a year—it might be more, but still it is not to be despised."

"Well," I said, resolved to conceal my contempt for his motives until I had heard him out, "but I do not see how you are to obtain Miss Lily's eight hundred a year, if the mother—as you say, that foolish woman—objects to a son-in-law with neither income nor prospects."

Then Fred underwent a process which I can describe in no other way than by the word "shuffling." He shuffled for the space of several minutes. He hummed and he hawed; he coughed and he blew his nose; he began half-a-dozen different sentences in as many minutes; he treated me to a whole shower of "you sees" and "you knows," until I felt so utterly bewildered as to what he meant to communicate to me, that there was nothing for it but to let him alone, and to wait patiently until some light should be thrown upon what he was driving at. At length a distinct sentence fell upon my ears. I caught at it eagerly as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"You have *invited* them to Follerton, you say? Do you mean you have asked them to come and stay with you there?"

"Yes. You see, if Mrs Hartley sees me there at Follerton—which, of course, in the right order of nature, ought to belong to me—she would be more impressed. She is a foolish woman, as I told you; she thinks a great deal about landed property, and old families, and all those kind of things: she attaches an undue importance to them."

At last I began to see daylight through the projects of this precious brother of mine. I could scarcely control my indignation to answer him with calmness.

"Do you mean to tell me, then, that you have been passing yourself off as the owner of Follerton to these people—that you have told them that it belongs to yourself?"

"Dear me, Margaret, you put things very coarsely. Of course I have not exactly told any deliberate untruth. I have merely told them that Follerton is a fine old place, that has been in my family for years, —belonged to my father, and that I am his only son and heir; and so I am. It is all perfectly true."

"Still you have made them believe that Follerton is yours," I persisted.

Fred looked down at his plate, and was, I verily believe, the least little bit ashamed of himself.

"They have taken the idea into their heads: I never told them so," he answered shiftily.

I was silent for a minute—scorn and contempt

kept me speechless; but I was determined to unfathom the extent of his falseness.

"Tell me," I said, forcing myself to speak quietly,—"tell me, then, what you propose doing?"

Fred roused himself from his momentary self-abasement.

"Well, Margaret dear," he said airily, "as there seems no prospect of your husband turning up just at present, I thought you might as well lend the old house to me. After all, it ought to be my own by rights, you know. I could put a few servants in,—get them in by the week,—and tidy it up a bit, and then Mrs Hartley and her daughter could come and pay me a short visit—a few days would be quite enough. The old lady, poor silly creature, would be quite satisfied that I am a landed proprietor, and therefore a respectable and proper sort of husband for her daughter—which of course I am, only she is so foolish, that she does not seem to understand it. She would see me there as master in the place, and believe that it belonged to me. A few days would suffice, and then I could follow them back to Exeter, and be married almost immediately, without any more fuss."

"Well—and afterwards? how would you account to your wife for the—the imposture?"

Fred laughed a little uneasily.

"What an ugly word, dear Margaret! Oh! of

course, after I am married, it will be easy to explain things to Lily: she is quite a child. I can tell her anything I like,—that the place is let,—that I have been obliged to sell it—any story will do for her; she need never go near it again; and she is very fond of me, poor little thing, she will believe anything I tell her.”

“And what will the ‘foolish woman’ say?”

“Oh! I shall not be likely to trouble my mother-in-law much when once I have got Lily.”

“And her eight hundred a year!”

“And her eight hundred a year, as you very sagely remark, my dear Margaret; so now I hope you will fall in with my little plans, and be a really kind, good sister to me, for once in your life.”

I walked away to the window and stood with my back turned towards him for some minutes, and then I came back to where he sat, and leaning my arms upon the back of my chair, and gazing fixedly at my only brother, I proceeded to address him in these words,—

“Fred, I think you are a cheat, a hypocrite, and a swindler!”

He started up in his chair, and looked at me with the most shocked and horrified face.

“Margaret,” he stammered, “what *dreadful* language! What can you mean by using such

words? Remember that you are a lady, pray, and, I should hope, a Christian."

I went on, utterly regardless of the interruption.

"I think I never in my life heard of such a villainous scheme to decoy and delude two unsuspecting women as that which you have just been at so much pains to unravel to me. You are, by your own showing, the meanest and the most unprincipled fortune-hunter. I am sorry that I have the misfortune of being your sister."

And then Fred began to whine and to whimper.

"You are very unkind to me, Margaret. You used to be fond enough of me a long time ago; but now you don't care about me. You are well off yourself; your husband gives you a good fat allowance, and you don't sympathise with people who are not so rich as yourself. You forget what it is to be poor and in debt; if you were so yourself, you would be ready enough to do anything you could to become better off; but you don't care for me now."

Contemptible as he was, a certain pity came into my heart for him. He was my own flesh and blood, and I had loved him dearly years ago.

I said gently,—

"I did not know you were so hard up. Why did you not come to me and tell me of your difficulties? I should have been glad enough to help

you. But I think it is a mean, ungentlemanlike thing to marry a girl only for her money, and to deceive her mother about your own means so as to induce her to consent to your marrying her daughter."

"But I am really fond of her," said Fred, quite humbly. "You mayn't believe it, perhaps, but I do really love her."

"Do you, Fred?" I said, more kindly; and then a sudden idea flashed into my mind.

I was silent for a minute, then I turned to him, and said,—

"If you are in earnest about her, I will try and help you to win her."

"But they must come to Follerton, Margaret, because I have invited them. I could never get out of it now, without confessing everything."

"Very well, then, they shall come; only I will be there to receive them."

"I don't understand you."

"Never mind, it is not necessary for you to understand. Is it next week you have asked them? Very well, next week they shall come—you shall bring them down yourself to Follerton, and you will find me ready there to receive you. I will see about the getting the servants in and all that; all you have to do is to bring Mrs and Miss Hartley there, and, if it can be managed, I promise you I

will win the 'foolish woman's' consent to your marriage. If I do, Fred, I shall expect you to begin life afresh, and with a firm resolve to be truthful, and honest, and upright for the future. No, don't thank me yet; if my scheme succeeds, you shall thank me later."

But Fred was profuse in his gratitude all the same, although he had not, of course, the remotest idea what I meant to do for him. He imagined, I daresay, that I intended to fall in with the programme of his own nicely-laid little plans. He little knew how differently I had arranged things in my own mind.

The next morning, after my brother's departure, when Mr Long made his accustomed appearance, I took the good old gentleman into the drawing-room, and then and there opened my heart to him, I told him that his patient's name was Stephen Hardcastle, and that he was my husband.

The good man's astonishment knew no bounds, and he was greatly distressed at all the terrible things he had told me concerning his fears and apprehensions.

"Never mind," I said, cutting short his broken apologies and regrets. "I know the worst, at all events, and perhaps it is as well that I should do so. Now, doctor, I have a plan to unfold to you, and I think you will agree with me that it is very likely to answer in restoring him to health."

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOW I GO BACK TO FOLLERTON.

"But I know that I love thee whatever thou art."

Moore.

THE plan that I proceeded to unfold to Mr Long was that I should take my husband back to my old home, and make myself known to him there. I did not, of course, enter into all the sad details of my married life to the worthy doctor; but I told him enough to make him understand that there had been a sad division between my husband and myself, and that I now ardently longed to be reunited to him.

The idea of taking him to Follerton had come into my mind whilst listening to Fred and his request, that I should lend him the old house for his not very creditable purposes; and no sooner had it entered my head than I became firmly resolved to carry it out; but to do so I had been obliged to take Mr Long into my confidence. I had hardly been able to await his arrival, so impatient was I to tell him what I desired to do; and the interval between breakfast and his daily visit, although filled up to-day by the departure, first of my brother, and then of Mrs Temple and Susanna for Ilfracombe, had appeared to me to be interminable.

At length, however, he had come, and I made my confession to him.

"Have you seen him to-day?" he inquired, as soon as he had heard all I had to say.

"No, not yet. I have left him to Payne."

"Then wait here for me; I will go up to him. I shall be able to tell you more when I have seen him."

He went upstairs, leaving me in the drawing-room to await his return. He was gone a very long time. I could hardly restrain my feverish impatience. I paced agitatedly up and down the room—going from one window to the other—opening every book on the table, only to fling it impatiently away—aimlessly turning over first the music on the piano, and then the contents of my work-basket, and unable to occupy myself in any reasonable or rational manner.

At length he returned—coming in in that quiet way which is common to doctors—closing the door softly behind him. There was a smile upon his face.

"Well?" I cried.

"Well, I find him better—much better—much quieter, and the sight is improving. Do you know, Mrs Hardcastle, I find that I shall have to perform a very slight operation upon the nerves of the eyes—they are contracted. Do not be frightened at the word operation—it will be a very small matter, not in the least dangerous, scarcely painful."

He proceeded to explain to me the nature of the slight operation, the result of which would be, he maintained, the instantaneous recovery of the sight.

"I see my way very well now to carrying out your plan. I have already paved the way to it, by telling him that the operation will be needful, and that it would be desirable to remove him to an opthalmic hospital for its performance. He bore the news very well, with much less agitation than I should have expected. Now, Mrs Hardcastle, do you see what I am coming to?"

I confessed that I did not quite follow him.

"Well," he continued, "I should propose that you precede him to your house, and get everything prepared for his reception, and I will follow with him the next day. I will tell him that we are on our way to the hospital, and he will imagine that he is going there. The operation shall take place in the house—Follerton Court, did you not say was the name? I will appoint a very clever surgeon, Mr Dickson, a friend of mine in London, to come down and meet me there, to assist me; and when the sight is restored, the enormous advantage of being in a house that is familiar to him, and finding you by his side, will, I have no doubt, prevent those other serious consequences which I apprehended a short time ago. Even then I warn you that the mind *may*—I do not say it will, but it may be slightly

unhinged for a time. I do not say this to frighten you, my dear lady, only to prevent your being too sanguine. Now I will go and make all needful preparations to start in a couple of days, and I shall leave you to do your best to get off as soon as possible. I shall see you again before you start, so good-bye for the present."

That was how I came to be at Follerton again, one lovely day in early August, sitting by myself up in the old attic playroom, with the broken furniture piled up round the walls as of old, and the ghost of Toby, the rocking-horse, still keeping guard in a distant corner, reared up on his hind legs, with his green stand prancing in the air. I am sitting on the window-sill crouched up, knees and nose together, and my face is buried in my hands. Away to the left of me stretches the old park, with its glades of chestnuts and Scotch firs in full glory; with the cattle standing in the pool of water, whisking their tails lazily to and fro in the heat; with the fat little white sheep browsing in the short sweet pasture nearer home; but I see them not,—I see nothing, I am only listening,—listening intently for a sound from the room below me; for there it is that the two doctors who are to restore to my husband his sight are now shut up with him.

They have been with him an hour. Oh! will they never have done this ghastly business! I

shudder as I think of it, and then I try to keep still, to stop that nervous trembling that shakes me from head to foot, in order that I may concentrate my whole being more intensely into the effort of hearing.

At last it comes, a quick footstep, heard distinctly in the perfect silence that reigns in the house, followed instantly by the sharp opening of a door.

In an instant I have flown from my place, and am half way downstairs. Mr Long comes to me with outstretched hands,—

“It is all over,—perfectly successful. Mrs Hardcastle, I congratulate you!”

“What has he seen?”

“Not much as yet; the shade is not off his eyes; he has only read a verse in very large print, out of the family Bible I found on the table, as a test. We held it below him; he has not looked up or recognised the room, and he is still a little bewildered by the chloroform. I thought you would like to be by him when the shade comes off. Wait a minute, my dear lady, I cannot let you go in with that white face—you look ready to faint yourself. A glass of wine I must prescribe instantly, or into that room you do not go.”

He went downstairs himself, and brought me a glass of sherry with his own hands before he would

allow me to stir in the direction of the sick-room. I gulped it down hastily.

"Now, I am ready," I said breathlessly.

He stood before me, holding the handle of the door in his hand.

"Wait a minute; I will tell you what to do. You are to stand behind him until I give you a sign; then go round in front of him, and I will take the shade off."

I followed him softly into the room. Stephen sat in the centre of the room, with his face to the windows, upright in an arm-chair, his head was slightly bent forward, a green shade was drawn over his eyes. I went and stood, as Mr Long had told me, behind him. The other doctor drew the blinds half way up.

"When I have untied the shade," he said to the patient, "keep your eyes shut, if you please, for a minute or two, then open them slowly."

He took the shade off, and I crept round softly, and knelt down in front of him. The next minute the door shut gently upon the two doctors, and I was alone with him.

His eyes were still closed. A minute's silence, during which my heart beat wildly.

"Shall I open my eyes?" he asked.

"Yes, my darling," I answered.

He started, his eyes opened, and he saw me!

"Madge!"

"Yes, dearest, it is I. Are you so very surprised?"

I don't think I said any more! only I put my arms up about his neck, and drew his dear, grey head on to my shoulder, and kissed him passionately and tenderly.

"Is it really you?" he said, holding me away from him, so as to look at me better. "Or am I blind still, and is it a dream?"

"No, it is no dream, Stephen, and your sight is restored. Ah! did you not guess that it is I who have been near you of late?"

"But where is Mrs Temple?"

"Mrs Temple knocked herself up, poor woman, in the first week of your illness, and since then it is I who have been Mrs Temple."

"Ah! you came to me from duty, from pity. You will leave me now that I am better again?"

"I came to you because I love you with all my heart, Stephen; and I will never leave you again as long as I live," I answered passionately.

"Is that true?" he murmured, in a low, joyful whisper.

I nestled close up against him.

"Yes, it is quite—quite true, and you never ought to have left me, Stephen. I am not half so unforgiving as you have made me out to be."

"But do you really forgive? Remember how deeply I sinned against you; how—"

I put up my hand and laid it on his lips.

"Hush! you are never to speak of it again. I have forgotten it."

"But, Madge, did you not love that other man?"

"That 'other man,' as you call him, has just married your little Paris friend, Nina Thirlwall, with whom he was so idiotically in love that he insisted upon running away with her, so you need never be jealous of him any more."

He held me closely to him in a joyful embrace.

"I am glad of that," he said, so seriously as to make me laugh; "and now, my darling wife, let us get away home to Follerton."

"Why, Stephen!" I exclaimed, "do you not see where we are? Look about the room—do you not recognise it?"

"Why, it *is* Follerton," he said, half bewildered. "I thought I was at an hospital!"

I laughed; and Mr Long, coming in again at this minute, joined heartily in the joke. The doctors soon cut short our interview, and drove me away from my husband's side, for fear of over-exciting him.

But after another four-and-twenty hours, he was so evidently in no further need of their attention, that they both took their leave. I could hardly find words to express to good Mr Long all my

gratitude for his unremitting care and attention, and his sympathy to myself.

"He is perfectly well," he said, shaking me warmly by the hand. "Keep him quiet; and don't let him travel about, or over-exert himself in any way, and you will have no further anxiety about him. With regard to his mind, it is now at perfect peace; and you know best, my dear Mrs Hardcastle, how that has been affected. The weight that was upon it has been entirely removed, and the tendency to melancholy mania has vanished. That is *your* doing, not mine. As to his sight, it is weak, of course, and will be for some time; don't let him use his eyes by candle-light, and don't allow him to write much at any time, and you will find it will get stronger by degrees. As his health settles again, so will his eyesight; and now good-bye, and don't thank me. I have only been too glad to see him so well again."

Grasping my hand once more, cordially and affectionately, the good old gentleman took his departure, and left me alone with my husband.

As soon as the tumult and excitement of this event had a little subsided, another thought began to fill my mind—Fred and his love affairs.

I very soon confided the whole story to my husband, and begged him to do what he could for my unfortunate brother.

"It seems a shame to begin by asking a favour of you, Stephen."

"My little woman, if you knew what happiness it gives me that you should ask anything of me—"

"I am glad of that, sir," twining my hands lovingly round his arm, "because I shall probably have a great deal to ask for. But to return to Fred—you have an uncle, a bishop, have you not?"

"And you want me to ask for a living for Fred—is that it?"

"I thought you might mention it to him."

No sooner said than done. The bishop was written to that very day, and his answer came by return of post. The application could not have been made at a better time. The bishop was old Mrs Hardcastle's favourite brother, and he had been deeply affected by her recent death. He was ready to do anything for her son.

He had not, he wrote, any living likely to be vacant before Christmas, but there would be a series of exchanges about that time amongst several of the clergy of his diocese, and a small living was then likely to be vacant, owing to the division of one large parish into two. It would not be worth very much, but there would be a good vicarage house attached. Stephen's brother-in-law should have the promise of that, if it would suit

him. Needless to say, Stephen joyfully accepted the proposition, in his brother-in-law's name, by return of post.

I had had several letters from Fred, with the details of his route, and the hours of his trains, since I had been at home; and at last the day of his arrival with his future bride and her mother came.

Never shall I forget my brother's face of bewildered amazement when, on stepping out of the carriage which had brought the whole party from the station, he found himself suddenly face to face with Stephen, who stood on the doorstep with me by his side, and held out his hand cordially to greet him.

"How d'ye do, Fred? I am glad to see you, and these ladies too. Pray come in."

"Dear me, Hardcastle! I am sure I did not expect to see you! I did not know—"

"You did not know that Maggie and I were at home again. Well, we did not write to tell you, for fear you should postpone your visit. Come in, Mrs Hartley."

The two ladies followed me into the drawing-room. The daughter was a timid and rather silly-looking little thing; the mother struck me as a pleasant and sensible woman. I began to entertain them as best I could; but I could see that Mrs

Hartley was rather bewildered and puzzled at our appearance on the scene.

Meanwhile my husband had placed the bishop's letter into Fred's hands. Then he came forward and took the elder lady by the hand.

"I hope, my dear madam," he said, with a pleasant courtesy, "that you will give your consent to these young people's engagement, when I tell you that Fred has just had the promise of a living in Buckinghamshire, of which he will be able to take possession at Christmas; and, lest his income should seem to you as insufficient, I am going to make him an allowance of £300 a year, in order that there may be no impediment to their speedy marriage, and I hope that you and your daughter will honour us by prolonging your visit for a few days."

What the "foolish woman" thought of it all, I know not, nor what account Fred gave of himself and his varied stories to his future mother-in-law; but whatever may have been her real feelings, Mrs Hartley wisely kept them to herself. She gave her consent readily to the marriage, and asked no inconvenient questions, and made herself very agreeable to the end of her visit.

Stephen and I were unfeignedly glad when they had all gone, and we were left alone again. We were eager to begin our new life together, and to

make up to each other for all the sadness and misery of our long separation.

"Darling," said my husband to me, drawing me fondly to his heart on that first evening when we were alone together after the departure of our guests—"darling, let us forget our bitter past. Are we not rewarded for it all by our present joy? I little thought that such happiness as your perfect love and forgiveness would ever be mine!"

"Nor did I ever deem," I answered, resting my head caressingly against his arm, "that I should ever live to rejoice and be glad when, safe in the shelter of your dear arms, I look back upon My LIFE'S MISTAKE."

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